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THE *HAMLET* OF SHAKESPEARE'S AUDIENCE

BY

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To
ARTHUR DAYTON

O et præsidium et dulce decus meum . . .
—Horace.

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PREFACE

"MANY MODERN critics have read themselves in, or into, the spirit of Hamlet: Coleridge laying emphasis on mental vacillation due to over-thinking, and Hazlitt on the melancholy that is caused by savage loneliness. . . . And yet we can only begin to understand the rudiments of Hamlet by steadily regarding him as an Elizabethan." Thus Professor Oliver Elton of Oxford concludes his lecture on "Hamlet the Elizabethan." Indeed, as in a religion, each critic has made his own interpretation of the sacred text, and then passed it down, as in a hierarchy, from professor to pupil. Unfortunately, many of these religions have no more to do with their major prophet than have some of the sects of Christianity and of Islam. Professor Bradley appears to think that the true interpretation of the play was unknown to the Elizabethans who crowded the theater, and began only a hundred and fifty years ago "when the slowly rising sun of Romance began to flush the sky";¹ and Sir E. K. Chambers likewise declares that his interpretation belongs "not to his [Shakespeare's] age but to our own."² Is the modern critic so much keener of discernment that he can see deeper into the play than the contemporaries to whose conceptions it was calculated, and deeper into life than the master-dramatist whom he professes to explain? The present writer dares offer no such ambitious program; and, if after a prolonged study of the tragedy in its multiform details and backgrounds, he can but grasp and explain such insight as the dramatist's own lines, seen in the light of their Elizabethan meaning, can supply, he will be well content. The textual criticism of Shakespeare outgrew this idea of "improving" on the original some two hundred years ago: should not interpretative criticism attempt a like advance?

There is but one *Hamlet*, and Shakespeare is its prophet, and all others are false. The object of the present study is to

¹ A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Criticism* (ed. princ., 1904, New York, 1926), pp. 91-92.

² E. K. Chambers (ed.), *Hamlet* (New York, 1917), p. xiv.

set forth, not your *Hamlet*, or mine—what right have we to Shakespeare's own creation?—but Shakespeare's play, if only our diligence can explain it: the *Hamlet* that he set forth to his own audience, and that we, because of subtle changes in the times and in the language, can discover only by reading the text with a knowledge of these changes. Shakespeare wrote in a literary and social idiom that his audience could understand; and he who would learn the meaning of the dramatist, things obvious as daylight to his contemporaries but so timely then that they are strange and abstruse to us, must be willing to follow the clues both in the play and in the pertinent writings of the age, no matter where they lead: he must be willing to sacrifice his dearest preconceptions, to refashion his attitudes, literary, moral, and social, that he may follow the evidence with an objective and single-minded fidelity.

Humanly speaking, this is a *tour de force*; but the present writer will risk attempting it in the faith that the object is worthy and the method just, even though mere human incapacity must make this ideal, like all ideals of scope and value, impossible of complete fulfilment. Unfortunately, the commonest commonplaces of one age—just because they were so common that people rarely troubled to write them down—are the hardest things for another age to realize and understand: the veriest fool in any generation knows the hour for dinner and the dishes that are likely to be served; but one might read widely in the literature of that generation, and still be ignorant of such obvious daily matters. In the realm of *mores* and ideas, this is even more elusive: how much Elizabethan literature might one read before one realizes that the age treated cowardice as a more serious social offence than either murder or adultery? To collect all the Elizabethan writings pertinent to a long and complex play like *Hamlet* is truly counsel of perfection; to take to oneself completely the Elizabethan attitude, or varying class attitudes, toward life is sometimes more than one can hope of the imagination; and to see all the minutiae of the text in the light of all these pertinent ideas and facts and also of all the rest of the play, puts

no moderate strain on the most inclusive mind; but the effort is a challenge and an adventure; and, in this challenge and this adventure, the present writer asks the reader to participate in a spirit of co-operation, and where necessary, of indulgence.

Several chapters and parts of chapters are here reprinted, more or less revised, from various periodicals in which they first appeared: "Queen Gertrude," in the *Revue Anglo-Américaine*; "Osric," in the *Revue de Littérature Comparée*; "The Elder Hamlet and the Ghost," in the *Bulletin* of the Shakespeare Association of America; "Ophelia and Laertes," in the *Philological Quarterly*; "Ophelia's Crime of *Felo de Se*" in the *West Virginia Law Quarterly*; "Hamlet's Melancholy," in the *Annals of Medical History*; "The Prince-Philosopher and Shakespeare's Hamlet," in the *Bulletin* of the West Virginia Philological Society; "Hamlet's Schoolfellows," in *Englische Studien*; "Lord Chamberlain Polonius," in the *Jahrbuch* of the Deutsche Shakespeare Gesellschaft; and "My Switzers," in the *Modern Language Review*. The present volume, however, is not a mere collection of scattered papers, but rather an effort at a complete and systematic study of the play; and very little of the latter half of the book has ever seen the light of print before. The separate study of each minor character is intended, not to stand alone, but to lead up to final discussion of Hamlet himself and of plot and setting and theme; and these altogether should comprise a full and systematic interpretation of the entire tragedy.

The bibliographies of Professors Raven, Tannenbaum, Craig, and Schücking make a similar compilation needless in the present volume; and, moreover, a rapid review of scholarship prefaces the discussion of each major problem. Footnote references to *Hamlet* are generally omitted: their inclusion would increase the number of citations from a few hundred into the thousands; and, for some chapters, such references can easily be found in the versions already published in the learned periodicals. The first index lists in order of acts and scenes the major discussions of each important passage in the play so that the reader of Shakespeare's text can readily turn

to the appropriate part of the present volume. The second index includes not only names of places, characters, plays, and the like but also the chief generalities of social, medical, and legal background and a full list for bibliographical purposes of the contemporary Elizabethan writers and of the modern scholars that are cited.

The author wishes to express his thanks to the custodians of the Library of West Virginia University, the Library of Congress, the Surgeon General's Library, the Folger Shakespeare Library, and the Library of the Institute of the History of Medicine at the Johns Hopkins University, and to Mrs. M. D. Pendred for research in the British Museum. For assistance in reading proof, he owes grateful acknowledgement to his wife and to his son Daniel; for oversight of publication, to Dr. R. O. Rivera of the Duke University Press; and, for criticisms and suggestions, to Professor F. C. Brown of Duke University. For making possible publication, he takes pleasure in thanking Herbert Fitzpatrick, Esq., of Huntington, West Virginia, Dr. Charles McCamic and Judge J. H. Brennan, of Wheeling, Robert S. Spilman, Esq., Judge Harold A. Ritz and especially Arthur Dayton, Esq., of Charleston, without whose suggestion and encouragement the present volume could not have been.

J. W. D.

Morgantown, W. Va.

May 1, 1938.

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THE *HAMLET* OF SHAKESPEARE'S AUDIENCE

CHAPTER I

INTERPRETING SHAKESPEARE'S *HAMLET*

If we would interpret Shakespeare,—whether as actors, or as public critics, or merely for our private enlightenment and behoof,—we must comprehend his media of expression: which were, first, dramatic; and second, Elizabethan. And the second medium, the Elizabethan, includes two elements, the times and the language, with neither of which is it quite easy for us to get into intimate relations. For in such an enterprise we moderns, we Americans, have much to learn, and scarcely less to unlearn.—GEORGE LYMAN KITTREDGE.

DURING THE last two hundred years, *Hamlet* has probably been written upon more than any other drama in all literature; and any critic who presumes to add to this accumulation ought first to show the world why his attempt has any right to the luxury of print. This obligation involves first the ungracious business of pointing out sundry shortcomings in his elders and predecessors, and then the hazardous promise on his part to amend their faults and to supply such of their omissions as he can. The present writer embarks upon the former with reluctance, and upon the latter with fitting trepidation.

The main object of the criticism of any art-work is the correct interpretation of its meaning and artistic purpose; and the interpretation of *Hamlet* in large measure has been as unsatisfactory as it is alarmingly diverse. This diversity, even at the hands of the academic and the learned, who are supposed to be hopelessly orthodox and fixed in their ideas, has been so fundamental and so multiform as to bewilder the very elect, so that, since the Furness Variorum Edition of 1877 brought together the earlier commentary on the play, scholars themselves, every ten years or oftener, have had occasion to write, to print, and to read summaries of *Hamlet* theory¹ in an effort

¹ E.g., R. Löning, *Die Hamlet Tragödie Shakespeares* (Stuttgart, 1893); A. Döring, *Ein neuer Versuch zur ästhetischen Erklärung der Tragödie* (Berlin, 1898), Appendix II; A. H. Tolman, *Views about Hamlet* (New York, 1904); W. Pfeiderer, *Das seelische Verhältnis zwischen Hamlet und Ophelia* (Berlin, 1908), pp. 7 ff.; W. F. Trench, *Shakespeare's Hamlet* (London, 1913); and B. R. Conrad, "Hamlet's Delay," *PMLA*, XLI, 680 ff.

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to keep up with the kaleidoscope of all that is said and gain-said about the play. Although these summaries mitigate the detail of the present writer's task, yet a brief criticism of criticisms can hardly be avoided.

The earlier discussions need not detain us long. Although in Elizabethan and Jacobean times the play seems to have been popular, no contemporary interpretations have survived. The eighteenth century edited the play, and made some scattering comment, usually incidental to other matters. The Romantic movement established its fame as Shakespeare's masterpiece; and the generations of Herder, Goethe, Schlegel, Coleridge, and Hazlitt proclaimed it a work of universal genius, which, since it was universal, they interpreted in their own image, as an expression of their own Romantic ideas and mental processes. Nevertheless, even their interpretations do not by any means agree. Their lectures and essays are often beautiful prose, and have importance as portraying their personal reactions; but, when a critic looks in his heart and writes, rather than at the masterpiece that he is trying to explain, the result is a lyric expression of himself, and not a true delineation of the masterpiece. Thus, more than occasionally, these critics ignore even the *ipsissima verba* of Shakespeare's text in order to expound a pretty theory appropriate to their prose poems. True scholarship and true interpretation are things more objective and of wider validity than this.

Shakespeare, indeed, is a particularly unhappy theme for subjective criticism; for, even if such a critic keep his eye close upon the master, he is almost sure to go astray: we first read the plays at an early age before we are capable of any mature opinion; and, being human, we can hardly quite give up such early preconceptions; if, moreover, we experience the plays, as Shakespeare intended, in the theater, we are liable to see the interpretation of some actor who prides himself more on his own originality than on his truth to the original, and we hear a text cut, revised, rearranged, and perhaps translated, to meet the conditions of a modern stage, the taste of a modern audience and sometimes even the vanity of a modern "star";

if we read the play as we do a novel, expurgation or a careless text may conceal important clues as to the meaning, and perusal in the closet, even of the most painstaking edition, throws out of focus the comparative values of word and action, giving to the former a preponderant importance that it lacks upon the stage. Hamlet, for instance, calls Polonius a "wretched, rash, intriguing fool," and terms King Claudius a "toad" and a "satyr"; and many critics have accepted these characterizations without weighing them against the actions of the persons concerned or the attitudes of the other characters toward these actions. Furthermore, we carry over into a depiction of the Elizabethan times our twentieth-century conceptions and ideals: feminism has ruined Ophelia; and democracy, King Claudius. Thus neither the modern stage nor the printed text furnishes a true and adequate presentation of the play to the eye of the subjective critic. Only by making himself over into an Elizabethan, if that be possible, and seeing the play given complete, on an Elizabethan stage and in Elizabethan fashion, could the subjective critic achieve a result that would approximate Shakespeare's meaning; and Shakespeare's meaning, in so far as it can be learned, is the only true or important meaning, the only meaning that a teacher has any right to ask his classes to spend their time in learning, or that a critic has any right to present before his readers.

More pedestrian students of the play meanwhile have been at work on the text, and on the linguistic background; for, as far as possible, there must be no question what Shakespeare's words are and what they mean. Quarto and folio versions must be collated, and work done on sources, date, and so forth: all these things are necessary for seeing the play in its milieu; and only by such a broad and comprehensive view can its sense be brought to light. Unfortunately, the Shakespeare critics of the nineteenth century, though some of them engaged in this detailed and strenuous activity, made all-too-modest use of it in their interpretation of the characters and plot. A few problems, moreover, sometimes of rather limited importance, absorbed undue attention: whence came the proper names of the

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characters? was Hamlet mad? did Ophelia really love him? Some of these topics, moreover, such as Hamlet's madness, were discussed and re-discussed, with little or no effort to collect their Elizabethan background. Thus the meaning of the tragedy, if defined at all, was left to the "appreciative" critics, who usually expressed it in the current shibboleths of mid-Victorian ethical ideals; and *Hamlet* became a sort of belated morality-play, in which the characters represented, not real Elizabethan types and individuals, but merely virtues and vices according to popular nineteenth-century standards.

More recently, though this subjective school is far from dead, a growing number of scholars has sought by more scientific methods to pluck the heart from the drama's mystery by studying various more or less pertinent types of Elizabethan background. The late Professor Thorndike investigated its fellow tragedies-of-blood; and Professor Stoll and Professor Schücking have studied contemporary stage-conventions, such as the melancholy-malcontent type of character: Shakespeare's use of a stock figure or a technical device, to be sure, does not directly settle the interpretation of the play; but where he departs from such stock figures, he gives a clue to his main purpose; and, moreover, some of the conventions that the work of these critics has established help the interpreter to weigh his evidence: the common convention, for example, that any statement made in a soliloquy or an aside must truly reflect the sincere, though perhaps mistaken, thought and feeling of the speaker, gives such statements particular importance; and, likewise, when a new character is introduced, or when two characters first meet, any statement of their relationship and attitude toward each other may generally be taken as not only true but important in the plot. Both these conventions find apt illustration in Hamlet's initial comment on the King, "A little more than kin and less than kind," which emphasizes the basic motives of the plot, the Prince's objection to the marriage, and his antagonism toward Claudius: the sentence is an aside; it comprises Hamlet's first words in the play; and, as the King has just addressed him, it is a fit expression of the

clash between these two protagonists. Professor Baldwin's study, furthermore, of the Shakespearean stock company and the type of part that each actor played, helps to fix the interpretation of any given role; and those who would make Polonius a mere doting fool may well bear in mind that in Shakespeare's company his part was cast for an actor who specialized in the portrayal of eminence and exalted dignity.

Not only Elizabethan background in the theater and its ways, but also in the science of the age, has been recently investigated. Professor Kittredge, Professor Dover Wilson, and the present author have studied the demonological background of the Ghost, and have thus been able to explain its supernatural character and Hamlet's attitude toward it and his apparent hesitation in the first half of the play. The present writer and others have also done research on the political background of the tragedy: James I had but one claim to the throne of England, and that was by birth as a Divine Right monarch; and the controversies before and after his accession popularized political theory, and made it necessary for a court-dramatist like Shakespeare to express the accepted view in matters of statecraft; and many of Shakespeare's later plays clearly reflect this influence. Something, moreover, must be done on the legal aspects of Ophelia's suicide and burial. This background of Elizabethan popular science can sometimes be most revealing; but it can also be easily overstressed; for Shakespeare was not, like Ben Jonson, a scholar who loved learning for itself; and he was too astute a dramatist to pack his plays with unnecessary erudition that would only confuse his audience.

Elizabethan medicine, because of its allied theories of psychology, should be particularly significant; and Professor Hardin Craig, Miss Anderson, and Miss Campbell have labored in this field. Following Galen and the medieval tradition, the Elizabethans believed that the human body contained four fluids or "humors," and that a preponderance of any one of these governed the mental bent of the individual: thus too much blood made one sanguine; too much phlegm, phlegmatic; choler (i.e., bile), wrathful or choleric; and black bile,

melancholy (i.e., subject to fits of exasperation and depression). A man who easily vacillated between these extremes was said to be "mercurial," and one who had a happy balance of the four was considered in perfect physical and mental health. Most men were thought to incline by nature to one or another humor; but also special circumstances, such as love or turmoil of events, might bring about a change; and each stage of life, moreover, had its special humor: the sanguine for youth, the choleric for maturity, and the melancholy for old age; and this theory helps to indicate the period of life of several characters in the play. Moreover, when one can place a character under a given humor, this explains in some degree his words and actions: Laertes, for example, is clearly a case of the choleric type, and this gives motive to his crucial part in the last half of the tragedy; and Hamlet has clearly been reduced by stress of circumstances to a case of melancholy.

The extensive work on Shakespeare's sources has also contributed its quota to the understanding of *Hamlet*: the Elizabethan playgoer required that the dramatic form of a well-known tale should contain all the most popular episodes of its original. The dramatist, therefore, made at his peril any variation in the plot; and a study of these variations should reveal his fundamental purpose. Lewis, indeed, suggests that Shakespeare dared not change the story at all, and that, in consequence, Hamlet's actions, being derived from the sources, present the Prince in one light, and his soliloquies, being Shakespeare's own, present him in another, thus making the play an *omnium gatherum* of inconsistencies. But, in fact, Shakespeare does change Hamlet's actions considerably from the originals; and, moreover, such derogatory criticism should be accepted only as a last resort. Truly, if Shakespeare is the consummate artist that the world has generally supposed, the most significant part of his plays should be, not the general outline that he borrowed, but the mass of endless detail scattered all along the way that he added or revised or rearranged. Thus, for example, in the references to the Ghost early in the play, Shakespeare's text keeps constantly before the audience

a doubt as to its exact identity: is it the King or merely a devil in his shape? This reiterated doubt, which is emphasized in none of Shakespeare's sources, must indeed have some importance in the action.

Unfortunately, however, the immediate source of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, an old play probably by Kyd, is not to be had in its full original form; and the relation of Shakespeare to such previous versions as we have is somewhat problematical.² He doubtless knew but little of the medieval Danish chronicles and the wealth of early folklore more or less connected with the story;³ he may not have known even the *Histoires Tragiques* of Belleforest. But although we have no copy of the old play attributed to Kyd, the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, which survives in an early eighteenth-century manuscript, appears to be a German version of it, cut for presentation by a company of actors touring the Continent. Further problems arise, moreover, regarding the early editions in quarto and in folio of Shakespeare's own version. The first quarto published in 1603 is so crude and so different from the texts of the later quartos and the folio that even its Shakespearean authorship has occasionally been called in question; and the later editions, though they constitute a sort of standard text, differ so considerably among themselves as to suggest revision by the author. The exact relationship of these early texts presents "the most puzzling enigmas of any in creation";⁴ but the first quarto would seem rather clearly to be an early Shakespearean version in somewhat mangled form; and the folio would seem to be a revision of the later quartos. Thus, not only the play as a whole, but specific characters and situations can more or less be traced from Shakespeare's source through one or more revisions at his hands; and his changes, so far as we can infer them, furnish a useful clue as to his meaning and artistic purpose. In *Timon of Athens*, in like manner, Shake-

² Cf. H. D. Gray, "Reconstruction of a Lost Play," *P.Q.*, VII, 254 ff.; and H. R. Walley, "Shakespeare's Conception of *Hamlet*," *PMLA*, XLVIII, 784 ff.

³ F. Schick, *Corpus Hamleticum* (Berlin, 1912); K. Malone, *The Literary History of Hamlet* (Heidelberg, 1923); etc.

⁴ J. Dover Wilson, *The Manuscript of Shakespeare's Hamlet* (New York, 1934), I, 6.

speare quite transformed the old misanthrope of Elizabethan lore into an admirable character, made him a great noble ruined by the liberality traditional among his social class and by borrowing at usurious rates of interest. This fundamental change in plot and character, the dramatist apparently made because he intended the play to lament the economic decline of the old nobility in the reign of James I—a decline generally attributed to their continued liberality in an age of economic stress and of extortionate rates of interest; and, since Shakespeare and his audience still believed in the “freedom” of Chaucer’s knight and sympathized with the decaying county families and hated the upstarts who were supplanting them, he transformed the misanthrope Timon into a hero and made his extravagance a virtue, the loss of which brought ruin to the state of Athens. Thus Shakespeare changed his sources to give his material timeliness and point, much as a medieval poet might revise an old romance to make it accord with the changing ideals of a new generation of listeners. What similar changes did Shakespeare make in *Hamlet*?

Not only the scholarship on sources of the play but the labor of textual criticism is not to be overlooked; and modern editions cannot be accepted quite without doubt or question. Many of them, for example, contain the adjective *bloat* as applied to King Claudius by Hamlet in the closet scene; and some critics have used it as evidence of his physique and character; and yet it appears in none of the early editions; and the words that do appear make satisfactory sense. Even when a passage, furthermore, has unquestionable authority in one or several of the early texts, its meaning should most carefully be scanned: one must remember that “wretch” was often a term of endearment in Elizabethan times; and one must know the Elizabethan senses of “adulterate” as applied to Claudius, and so comprehend his relations in the pre-play with the Queen. Idioms and grammatical peculiarities, many of which have changed since Shakespeare’s day, must thoroughly be mastered; and, if one is to enjoy the puns and hear the music of the verse, one should, if it be possible, cut the Gordian knot of

Elizabethan pronunciation. Nouns, verbs, and adjectives must be studied in the light of Shakespeare's other uses and in the light of their recorded meaning in the *New English Dictionary*, so as to arrive both at their literal sense and their poetic coloring. Even the adverb *still* had rarely its modern meaning; and pronouns, as in many Continental languages, varied in usage according to the intimacy or the comparative social status of the speakers: this is an invaluable index of anger or disdain and of relation of character to character in the rather hard and fast class-system of the age. Indeed, the very text has not yet been exhausted as a commentary upon itself; and critics do not seem to realize that the royal bodyguard that appears at the beginning of the play are presumably foreigners; for they surely are identical with the "Switzers" on whose protection Claudius calls when Laertes breaks into the palace much later in the tragedy: their being foreigners explains more than one moot question of interpretation.

All of these approaches have their use and value: an accurate text and a precise understanding of both the meaning and the poetic coloring of the words are the *conditiones sine qua non* of any sensible criticism; a grasp of the conditions of stage-performance and of the conventions of current plays helps in evaluating evidence to give weight to soliloquies and asides; a knowledge of the popular science and beliefs of the period is indispensable in defining the contemporary attitude toward the phenomena portrayed; and Shakespeare's sources and the growth of the conception in his mind as far as possible should be taken into account. But even all this together is not enough. Greater than his sources, than the learning that he used, than the poetry of his language and the dexterity of his theatrical technique, greater than all these to William Shakespeare was life itself; and, of supreme importance in studying his work is the surging and pulsating society of the Elizabethan age, the only society that he and his audience really knew, and, therefore, the only social idiom by which he could hope for verisimilitude. This interest often explains his changes from his sources; it dominates his use of such learning as he

employed and his manipulation of the technical devices of his art. Thus the social conditions of the age furnish the most fundamental, the most revelatory, background; for the plays of Shakespeare are the expression of very life.

In Shakespeare's earlier work, his interest in contemporary social life is increasingly apparent. The first plays, like his nondramatic poems, depend for their effect, chiefly on style—in comedies like *Loves Labours*, on brilliant wit; in serious plays like *Romeo and Juliet*, on exquisite lyricism; and sometimes, as in *A Comedy of Errors* and in the history plays, he delights the audience mainly with mere story. As Shakespeare grew more and more to understand the Renaissance life of London, and to feel its contrast with Stratford, which lived still in the Middle Ages, he expressed more and more vividly the contrasting types of rustic and of sophisticated life:⁵ in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for instance, the court of Athens over against Bottom and his tradesman-colleagues. With increasing verve and depth of insight, he studied the problems of the servant class, personal, social and economic;⁶ he studied the merchant in his struggle against the usurer;⁷ and so by degrees, he extended his purview to lords and ladies, their desires and ideals and their methods of achieving them: how Olivia gets a husband and yet retains her freedom;⁸ how younger sons like Orlando, overcoming the obstacle of birth, win fame and a career;⁹ how impecunious soldiers like Falstaff¹⁰ and his page, young Robin,¹¹ when fallen on evil days, take to low shifts and chicanery and downright theft to make ends meet. The relationship between these plays and conditions of contemporary life must not merely be guessed by inference from the

⁵ See the present writer, "Court vs. Country in Shakespeare's Plays," *J. E. G. Ph.*, XXXIII, 222 ff.

⁶ See the present writer, "Shakespeare's Rustic Servants," *Sh. Jhb.*, LXIX, 87 ff.; and "Olivia's Household," *PMLA*, XLIX, 797 ff.

⁷ See the present writer, "Usury in the 'Merchant of Venice,'" *M. P.*, XXXIII, 37 ff.

⁸ See the present writer, "The Wooing of Olivia," *Neophil.*, XXIII, 37 ff.

⁹ See the present writer, "Orlando, the Younger Brother," *P. Q.*, XIII, 72 ff.

¹⁰ See the present writer, "Sir John Falstaff," *R. E. S.*, VIII, 414 ff.

¹¹ See the present writer, "Falstaff's Robin and Other Pages," *S. P.*, about to appear.

text but also duly documented not only from other plays—for then the matter in question might be a mere convention of the theater—but also from treatises, popular song and story and ephemeral pamphlets, from books of “characters,” domestic conduct books, sermons, and works on courtesy and manners: so the realism of Falstaff, for example, can be demonstrated from the tracts on army life by such writers as Riche and Digges. Thus emerges some sort of answer to the question: how far does such a character run true to current form; how far is he abnormal or fantastic; and, in either event, would the Elizabethans admire, tolerate, or despise him? Until we know these things, we can neither understand why Shakespeare hated Shylock and Malvolio, nor read aright the theme and purpose of any given play.

The plays that precede *Hamlet* study the social fringes and the ornaments of court-life. The court is their setting; but its serious concerns are generally ignored: we can only guess the reasons of state for Orsino’s wooing of Olivia; Claudio’s repudiation of his betrothed seemingly has no political effects; and the usurping Duke in *As You Like It* retires from his tyranny for no apparent reason.¹² For the first time, in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare fully and realistically portrays the political problems of a court: regicide, revolt, dynastic succession, and all the accompanying policy and intrigue. The court was the center of all Renaissance society, the well-spring of power and success; and, when Shakespeare came to writing *Hamlet*, he seemingly felt himself equal at last to an artistic problem that involved, not only the depiction of its outward pomp and circumstance apparent to all observers, but also of its inner workings, which only the privileged could know: this was a *tour de force* of realism; and realistic it must be; for an audience of London, of the Inns of Court, of Westminster, and of Greenwich, was indeed sufficiently informed to notice any slip and to object to any element of plot or character that ran contrary to their beliefs and their common experience. Royalty must

¹² See the present writer, “Political Themes in Shakespeare’s Later Plays,” *J. E. G. Ph.*, XXXV, 61 ff.

be truly royal; Polonius must be a convincing minister of state, fulfilling appropriate functions as such an official would; his family and household must be such as would belong to a great noble; and so with all the rest down to Osric and the gravediggers. Surely then in *Hamlet*, the social background cannot be ignored.

This then is the requisite equipment for the would-be critic who hopes to gain some adequate understanding of the play: a knowledge of the early texts, of the language including both the literal meaning and the connotation of the words, a knowledge of the contemporary stage and its conventions, of contemporary popular science and folklore, a knowledge of Shakespeare's sources and especially of his changes from them, and, so far as one can guess it, the reason for each change, and especially a knowledge of actual Elizabethan life in its multi-form complexity; for, to contemporary life, the dramatist assimilated the popular tales that formed his plots, to give them verisimilitude and significance. All this variety of background must be applied, not only in general but in some detail to each particular character and each disputed point. So far as the present writer knows, such an effort has not been made before.

Indeed, despite the mass of writing about *Hamlet*, critics have concerned themselves almost entirely with the title role, as even a glance at the variorum edition and at the more recent *Shakespeare Bibliography* by Ebisch and Schücking and the *Hamlet Bibliography* by Raven rather obviously reveals. Of course, the part of Hamlet, with over fifteen hundred lines, predominates in the play; but Claudius, with over five hundred, is not to be neglected, especially since Shakespeare's apparent revisions show a much greater proportional increase for him than for any other character: the spoken text of the Prince himself does not double, whereas that of Claudius almost triples. In spite of this, there is but one extended study of the King. Polonius has been much more written upon, but rarely with any pretense of completeness; and for a hundred years critics have been unable to agree whether he is a sage counsellor and a man of honor or a fool and an arrant knave—

surely a matter of some importance in the play. Horatio, who stands fourth in the number of his lines has been studied only rather casually; and Queen Gertrude, who occupies a crucial place as wife of the usurper and mother of the Prince, until recently has not received any sort of systematic treatment. Much ink has been spent on the origin of the names of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but very little on their characters or actions in the play; and those who have written on these minor roles have generally limited their attention to a single phase or confined their proof to a very incomplete survey of the evidence. If the character of Hamlet himself were plain and not so much a subject for debate, the lesser figures might more safely be ignored; but the uncertainty about the former demands a systematic effort to give some finality of treatment to the latter; and the present study, for this reason, will discuss the minor roles in detail before attempting to interpret Hamlet's character and the general meaning of the tragedy.

In order to accomplish this all-too-pretentious purpose forced on the writer by the nature of his materials, a somewhat intricate plan is unavoidable. The reader must clearly understand the importance of each character and its position in the play. He must be given some notion of the previous criticism of that character, whether it be much or little, a facile agreement or a more-or-less desultory debate. He must see each character against its proper Elizabethan background both in public and in private life, and in relation to the other roles that it touches. He must see, when possible, Shakespeare's conception of it unfold from the source in the *Bestrafte Brudermord* and perhaps in Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques*. Crucial scenes will need detailed analysis; and the parts of the more important characters throughout the play should be plotted step by step. As far as possible, the approval or disapproval of the audience toward each act and character should be made clear, so that the dramatic ironies, the satire, the humor, or the pathos of every scene is evident. This, of course, is counsel of perfection, but any approximation of it should reveal Shakespeare's intent in all the more important figures, his conception

of the entire play, and his purpose in writing it. More than half of the present volume must survey this comparatively neglected field of the sub-major and the minor roles. When these are evaluated and their places defined, each should be reviewed in relationship to Hamlet for such light as they can throw upon his character. The work of previous critics on the Prince should then be rapidly surveyed; and, after that, his own words and doings, systematically scanned to arrive at an interpretation of his motives and personality. If all this can be done with enough validity to carry at least some conviction to the reader, first the plot and then the setting, style, and theme of the drama may well be presented in review, so that the tragedy as a whole may appear as far as possible as it would to Elizabethan eyes: this, and no less than this, is the outline, scope, and purpose of the present study.

CHAPTER II

HAMLET'S SCHOOLFELLOWS

WHEN HAMLET's father died, the Prince was apparently attending the University at Wittenberg. The *Bestrafte Brudermord* states that he was in "Germany"; and Shakespeare's text implies no change in this respect from the accepted stage version of the story. Claudius mentions Hamlet as "going back to school in Wittenberg," as if the Prince had just come from there. Horatio has certainly just come from Wittenberg; and Hamlet greets him as "fellow-student," apparently referring to their recent relationship, and asks why he is not still attending classes. Hamlet refers likewise to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as "my two schoolfellows," and questions them for the latest news of the players in the "city"; and the only "city" mentioned is Wittenberg. In short, one can hardly escape the conclusion that Shakespeare thought of the four young men as college students all attending the University at Wittenberg shortly before the beginning of the play. When Hamlet came home from college to attend his father's funeral, the three others shortly followed him. Horatio came first and of his own accord to pay his respects at the late king's obsequies; and, somewhat later, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were privately commanded home to divert the Prince and cure his seeming madness. So much did these schoolfellows of Hamlet grow on the dramatist's imagination that between the quarto text of 1603 and the standard version, he seems to have almost doubled the number of their lines. Commentators, nevertheless, have given them only very incomplete discussion: Horatio, as the *fidus Achates* of Hamlet; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, either as false friends or as the unhappy victims of court intrigue. Some scholars have sought the latter among the Continental nobles of the day;¹ some have suggested that Horatio

¹ E.g., F. A. Leo, "Rosencrantz und Gildenstern," *Shak. Jhrb.*, XXV, 281, and XXVI, 325; P. Smith, "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern," *M. L. N.*, XXXVI, 374;

encouraged Hamlet to delay;² and Mr. Bradby thinks that his ignorance of the Danish court seems inconsistent with his position in the tragedy.³ This is short shriving for three characters so closely bound to the greatest and most disputed figure in English drama.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not appear in the pre-Shakespearean versions of the story, though in the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, Horatio has some of their actions; and the two lackeys who accompany Hamlet on his voyage to England should perhaps also be considered prototypes. The first quarto gives a rapid sketch of "Lord Rossencraft and Gilderstone." Claudius addresses them as "Right noble friends"; and Hamlet, as "kinde Schoole-fellowes": clearly, they are scions of great houses, worthy of such condescension from a king and of a prince's companionship. In the stage directions, they are "lordes"; and they form a delicate liaison between Hamlet and his stepfather. As in the standard version of the play, they try to find out the cause of the Prince's seeming malady; and Hamlet, taking them for the spies that they have unwittingly become, sends them to their deaths in England. The standard text, perhaps because by then the story was more fully known to London playgoers, implies more subtly their exalted rank and their intimacy with royalty. Claudius strikes the keynote by greeting them as "dear" and declaring that he "much did long to see" them for their own sakes, as well as for the occasion of his "hasty sending." He calls them "Friends both"; and he and the Queen address them as "Good gentlemen," and "entreat," rather than command, them to remain. The Elizabethans knew the niceties of etiquette; and the two young men, though not perhaps belted earls, must, at least by family connection, have belonged to the charmed circle of the great nobility. They have, moreover, been "brought up" with Hamlet; during more recent college days, they have appar-

D. C. Hess, "Hamlet and Frederiksborg," *Shak. Assoc. Bull.*, VII, 183; and J. Huizinga, "Rosencranz und Gildenstern," *Shak. Jhrb.*, XLVI, 60.

² A. Nicoll, *Studies in Shakespeare* (London, 1931), pp. 67 and 80.

³ G. F. Bradby, *Short Studies* (London, 1929), pp. 145 ff.; A. J. A. Waldock, *Hamlet* (Cambridge, 1931), p. 70.

ently frequented the same playhouses together; and, according to the Queen, "two men there are not living to whom he more adheres." This intimacy appears also in the familiarity of their talk with him before he suspects them of being spies. They are, in short, realistic portraits of young men of high station such as the elder Hamlet might well choose as companions for the Prince, his son.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, moreover, contrary to the opinion of most critics, seem to have been men of loyalty and honor, trying to serve at once their King and their Prince without any realization of the clash between these two high purposes. They had no grounds for suspecting Claudius; for they knew nothing of the regicide, and so had no reason to suppose that he harbored any sinister designs against the man whom he had recently declared Crown Prince; and Claudius was too shrewd to tell them all his fears and difficulties—at least, he certainly did not do so in the scenes in which he explained to them his wishes; and, had they suspected the true purpose of their grim errand to England, they doubtless would have guarded their despatch more carefully. They certainly are not intentional political "spies" as some critics would suggest;⁴ but rather, as Claudius says, gay companions brought home to divert Hamlet and so to cure his malady; and, in so far as they spied upon him, it was only toward this happy end. True spies would have had a preconcerted plan for deceiving the Prince; but, when he asks them why they returned to Denmark, they have no answer. Moreover, they do not give the King the very information that he wished: they do not tell him that Hamlet has discovered that they were "sent for"; or that the Prince is mad only "north-north-west" because he "lacks advancement"; or that he plans an addition to the tragedy that the players are to give. If Shakespeare wished us to suppose that they did any of these things, Elizabethan dramaturgy would have required him to tell the audience plainly. Their ignorance of the King's deeper motives

⁴ Cf. J. Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet* (New York, 1935), pp. 34 and 124.

keeps them from realizing his political and personal interest in such details; and, indeed, in answer to the direct question of Claudius, why Hamlet "puts on this confusion," they seem even to lie to protect the Prince; for, though his talk with them was on the whole quite sane, they evade further question by declaring it mere "madness." Of course, they should be as much on the side of Hamlet as of Claudius: was not the Crown Prince their future patron? had they not been brought up with him as close companions; and were they not his presumptive favorites and counsellors when he should become king? The courtiers' unceasing intrigue for the good graces of James I, even before he came to England, shows that the Elizabethans realized and valued such dynastic opportunities. No one in the play but Hamlet ever imputes to them evil motives toward him; and Hamlet in the last scene of the tragedy feels obliged to defend his treatment of them to Horatio:

Why, man, they did make love to this employment;
They are not near my conscience; their defeat
Doth by their own insinuation grow:
'Tis dangerous when baser nature comes
Between the pass and fell incensed points
Of mighty opposites.

In their speeches to the King and to one another, no evil intentions are apparent. They are simply two loyal courtiers, trying to carry out the wishes of their King and to cure their Prince of his malady. Hamlet, however, intent on his great purpose, imputes to those who are not his allies the worst of motives. He calls his old schoolfellows "adders fang'd," flatterers and timeservers to royalty; for he is too deeply partisan to be fair to those who seem to work against him. After the killing of Polonius, they apparently become his keepers; and, at the end of the tragedy, the Ambassador from England announces that Hamlet has succeeded in his counterplot to send them to their deaths.

Thus Hamlet's attitude toward Rosencrantz and Guildenstern undergoes a radical change. On first meeting them, he calls them "Good lads" and "My excellent good friends";

whereas he had greeted Horatio merely as "fellow-student";⁵ and he falls to badinage with them at once. Later, as his suspicions arise, he conjures them to be frank with him by "the beaten way of friendship" and "by the rights of our fellowship, by the consonancy of our youth, by the obligation of our ever-preserved love." As Shakespeare apparently added most of this dialogue in the later version, he seems to have intended to emphasize this intimacy to the audience, perhaps to accentuate Hamlet's risk that some friend might by mere accident pluck the heart from his mystery, perhaps to contrast with the cooler reception of Horatio. In both cases, Hamlet asks three times the reason for the other's coming: the final reply of the young nobles arouses all his doubts; that of Horatio, who had returned to attend the elder Hamlet's funeral, would raise him in a loyal son's esteem. This change in Hamlet's attitude toward Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, moreover, subtly appears in his use of the second person singular pronouns, the familiar "thou," in contrast to the more formal "you," and to the honorific third person of direct address. He greets Guildenstern as "thou," a charming condescension in a prince of the blood; but, as his suspicions grow, later in the scene and throughout the play thereafter, he changes to the more distant "you," when speaking to either of the pair. They use "you" to him rather than the extremely formal third person, as if they may presume thus far upon their intimacy; but Rosencrantz is hurt as Hamlet's difference in manner grows more marked, and painfully reminds him: "My lord, you once did love me." Even the belief that the Prince is not himself cannot quite reconcile him to such a change. Hamlet's growing coolness with the two shows him turning away from the merry days of youth and college, very much—and for the same reasons—as he dismissed Ophelia from his life: such entanglements encumbered his high purpose and constituted, indeed, a danger of betrayal. He is sad at Ophelia's death; but, for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he has only bitter enmity, and he exults to send these former playmates to their destruction—

⁵ Cf. Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

this Hamlet whom some have called hesitant and overscrupulous. Their career is indeed ironic: they return to court to save their Prince and friend from lunacy, and so become unwittingly the tools of his enemy and the objects of his hate; their efforts neither cure his malady nor ascertain for Claudius its cause; brought up as his companions, they have every reason to expect their Prince's highest favor; and, with a savage gusto, he sends them to their deaths. They are Aristotelian protagonists-in-little who, to their ruin, came "Between the pass and fell incensed points Of mighty opposites."

The apparent similarity of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern has raised the question whether Shakespeare in any way differentiated them; and, if not, why he had two characters when one would seemingly have done. Sir E. K. Chambers sees "no difference"⁶ between them; and their part in the plot is indeed identical; they enter and go out together; and even the detailed dialogue often treats them as one. Claudius welcomes them together rather than singly on their arrival; and so does Queen Gertrude; but this implies mere identity of social status. One of the pair often replies for both, or they speak in unison; and sometimes they repeat one another's ideas but slightly paraphrased; and Hamlet in the end groups them together in his hatred. Much of the dialogue in which they are concerned, however, is the conventional stuff of etiquette; and so their answers would have to be the same. Indeed, the text would seem to show some differences between them both in their characters and in their relationship to Hamlet. Guildenstern appears to be the stronger personality and the more impressed with his "duty" toward his King; Rosencrantz is rather the gay young courtier and undergraduate; and his age and speech and actions suggest the sanguine type, with which was associated all that is gay and charming. The reply of Rosencrantz to the two royal speeches of welcome stresses his pleasure at their gracious tone; Guildenstern is more concerned to lay his "service" at the royal feet "To be commanded." When Hamlet asks his embarrassing question as

⁶ *Hamlet*, ed. E. K. Chambers (New York, 1917), p. xv.

to the reason for their coming, Rosencrantz turns to Guildenstern to give the answer. Though Rosencrantz is the first to hazard the guess that "ambition" is the cause of Hamlet's sadness, Guildenstern not only tries this bait again, but at every opportunity asks the Prince leading questions: "In what" respects, his uncle and mother are "deceived"; and what does he think of Claudius as a king? Rosencrantz, to be sure, beseeches him to reveal his "cause of distemper"; but these frank questions exasperate Hamlet less than the more tricky ways of Guildenstern, whom he accuses of trying to play on him as on a pipe, and whom he calls by inference a liar. Rosencrantz is the more pleasing, the less aggressive, and apparently the more intimate with Hamlet: he first addresses the Prince as "My most dear lord"; whereas Guildenstern, stressing as he would Hamlet's superior rank speaks to him formally as "My honoured lord"; and Hamlet's farewell at the end of this long dialogue, with its note of cordiality, seems chiefly addressed to Rosencrantz. Such little things meant much for favor or disfavor to a courtier of the Renaissance. Hamlet's talk with Rosencrantz is not dampened by the admission that the two were "sent for"; Rosencrantz has much to say about the players, and seems, far more than Guildenstern, to share in Hamlet's interest in the theater. He seems even to give Hamlet a warning that he may shortly lose his "liberty"; and perhaps it was through his indiscretion that Hamlet first learned of the impending trip to England. At any rate, Hamlet vents his bitterness more quickly against Guildenstern; and later, when he does speak ill of Rosencrantz, accuses him, not of dishonesty, but merely of folly and of being a "sponge" of royal favor; but, in the end, he loses all distinction and hates both equally. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, therefore, are not mere parallel doublets: the former expresses more Hamlet's own merry youth; the latter, the sinister purposes of Claudius.

Of even greater moment and subtlety is the part of Horatio in the tragedy. Seemingly, the Hamlet story was so well known to the theatergoing public that Shakespeare could leave

more or less to inference, and could portray the lesser characters in occasional swift strokes so as to give most of the lines to Hamlet. A comparison of the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, the first quarto, and the standard version show these lesser characters appearing more and more purely in relation to the Prince, as mother, sweetheart, antagonist, or friend; and scholars who treat of the play too exclusively in its final form are therefore likely to see them too narrowly. Horatio especially has suffered. Three hundred years, moreover, have blunted our understanding of these finer strokes. The role of Horatio seems to derive in Belleforest from the "gentleman" who warns the Prince against his uncle's plots. Later, in the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, he has become an officer in the Danish army, the stage-type of the honest soldier who has been "at all times true" to Hamlet. The Prince tells him at once the message of the Ghost; and he puts into the Prince's head the notion that the Ghost has been deceiving him. He advises caution, and so supplies a motive for the play-within-the-play as further proof. He is Hamlet's confidant throughout; and, in the final scene, he is appointed by Hamlet to deliver the Danish crown to Fortinbras; and he speaks the concluding eulogy. Though the character is crudely drawn, its part in the plot is clear, consistent, and significant. The first quarto turns him into the scholar of Wittenberg who has come home to honor the elder Hamlet's obsequies; and it introduces the apparent inconsistencies that trouble Mr. Bradby. Horatio seems no longer to supply the motive for Hamlet's delay in his revenge; but he does appear in the new role of go-between from Hamlet to his mother, to inform her of her son's return from the abortive trip to England and of the impending death of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The retired scholar of the quarto, however, could hardly be made the bearer of the crown to Norway; and so Fortinbras appears in the last scene to claim Denmark for himself. In the standard version, Horatio has even less significance in the plot: he neither urges Hamlet to delay, as in the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, nor acts as liaison between him and the Queen. He is the Prince's confidant and little more: at the beginning of the play, he tells

Hamlet about the Ghost; in the middle, he reinforces, though somewhat needlessly, Hamlet's impression of Claudius' guilt; and, at the end, he witnesses Hamlet's vote for Fortinbras, and speaks the eulogy. But as Shakespeare lessened his importance in the plot, he increased the number of his lines; and this paradox demands investigation.

Horatio's social rank is perhaps the most fundamental question. In the first scene of the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, where he seems to be an officer among soldiers, he uses "thou" to them as inferiors; and they use "you" to him. In the first quarto, he and Marcellus, as intimates, use "thee" and "thou" to one another; and the other guardsmen generally "you," especially to Horatio, with whom apparently they are not as well acquainted as was Marcellus. The entrance, moreover, of Horatio with Marcellus also suggests that the two were intimates; and the dialogue implies that Marcellus brought in Horatio, who was not a soldier and so not of the watch, to witness the apparition and to explain it. In the standard version also, this relationship is carefully maintained. Marcellus and Horatio use "thou" to each other; and, to the latter, Bernardo uses "you." When the Ghost first appears, Marcellus calls on Horatio as a "scholar" to "speak to it," and again to "Question it" in the appropriate terms that a university education might be expected to supply. Hamlet also mentions Horatio as a "scholar," refers to his "philosophy," and says that he is "no truant" from his studies. Thus he is clearly fit for the dangerous and erudite business of speaking to the Ghost, and does so, if not with an incantation, at least in good set terms. He delivers himself, moreover, of two quite passable lectures on current politics and on the timely theme of demonology, in which he nicely weighs classical authority against a learned skepticism. Shakespeare then has deliberately shifted him from the military to the academic; and it is more pleasant to regard Horatio as the dramatist's conception of a scholar than the churlish Apemantus in *Timon of Athens*.⁷

⁷ The rare portrayals of the scholar-type on the Elizabethan stage were usually "discreditable." See E. B. Reed, "The College Element in 'Hamlet,'" *M.P.*, VI, 464 ff.

Horatio is certainly a Dane: his journey home to attend the funeral of the late king would suggest as much, and also his knowledge of Danish history and politics. He speaks, moreover, of "Our last king," and of "our state," and seems, once at least, to call himself a "Dane." But Horatio is ignorant of many things that any Danish courtier ought to know.⁸ Though a "gentleman,"⁹ as his relations with the Prince and Marcellus show, yet he is strangely ignorant of both the customs and the personalities of the court. The "heavy-headed revel" of Danish royalty must be explained to him. Apparently, he has never heard of Yorick. Hamlet has to tell him who Laertes is. He has not the pleasure of Osric's select acquaintance. His repeated assurances that he has seen the former king, though apparently but "once," suggest that Marcellus and Hamlet would not have expected him to recognize the Ghost; and this "once" was apparently not at court.¹⁰ Hamlet, moreover, clearly implies that Horatio was not "native" to Elsinore. Not only is Horatio ignorant of the court; but, even more important, the court, until the last scenes of the play, seems ignorant of him. He does not move in the charmed circle of Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern, whose death brings from him only casual remark. The King asks him, but not by name, to follow Ophelia; and, though present in the scene, he is almost entirely ignored. Shakespeare deleted him from the court-scenes until the play-within-the-play, to which Hamlet seems to give him a special invitation. Neither Claudius nor Gertrude thinks to use him to discover Hamlet's malady, though both, for different reasons, make every effort to learn it, and do not hesitate even to use Ophelia. As late as the fourth act, when Horatio and a "Gentleman" enter to tell the Queen of Ophelia's madness, the "Gentleman" does practically all the talking; and Horatio seems to be shown on the stage only to remind the audience that, though Hamlet has started for England, his friend remains at Elsinore. Indeed, he seems to be unknown

⁸ Bradby, *op. cit.*, pp. 145 ff.

⁹ On Elizabethan standards of gentility, see R. Kelso, *The English Gentleman of the Sixteenth Century* (Urbana, Ill., 1929).

¹⁰ *Hamlet*, I, i, 49 and 60 ff.

to the court until Act V, when the King asks him to follow Hamlet and "wait upon him"—an arrangement that undoubtedly helps Hamlet by freeing him for the moment from other guards. To judge by Polonius' conversation with Reynaldo, the Danish aristocracy was well informed of the doings and the associates of their sons at college; and one infers not only that Horatio had not been reared at court but also that he and Hamlet had not been intimates at Wittenberg. A gentleman and a scholar, but not of the court or capital—where then did Horatio belong in the closed corporation of Renaissance society; for the Elizabethans could hardly have conceived him, as critics seem to do, merely as Hamlet's friend, suspended in a social vacuum? Like Chaucer's "clerk," he is "poor," and possesses "no revenue . . . but . . . good spirits"; and he has no friend but Hamlet who would address him in a letter. Shakespeare seems to picture him as the learned counterpart of Bassanio or Orlando,¹¹ impoverished young gentleman of the day, often younger sons without inheritance, for whom apparently the dramatist had special sympathy. Having no knowledge of the court, moreover, he must have been, like Orlando, from the country;¹² and, even more like Sir Roland's second son, he spends his time and slender patrimony for learning. As law, medicine,¹³ and even military science¹⁴ became more and more complex and technical, and as other means of livelihood were by degrees closed to the gently born, many county families, on whom an age of rising prices forced economies¹⁵ that forbade the support of idle relatives, sent their sons to the universities to prepare them, if not for these careers, at least for Holy Orders.¹⁶ Thus surely would the audience conceive Horatio. Just what he was studying at

¹¹ See the present writer, "Orlando, the Younger Brother," *P. Q.*, XIII, 72.

¹² See the present writer, "Court vs. Country in Shakespeare's Plays," *J. E. G. Ph.*, XXXIII, 222.

¹³ See *Shakespeare's England* (Oxford, 1917), I, 381 ff. and 413 ff.

¹⁴ See the present writer, "Captain General Othello," *Anglia*, XLIII, 296.

¹⁵ Of course classes with fixed incomes suffered. See the present writer, "The Theme of 'Timon of Athens,'" *M. L. R.*, XXIX, 20.

¹⁶ Learning was becoming necessary for gentility. See Dudley, *Tree of Commonwealth* (1509) (Manchester, 1859), p. 19; and Kelso, *op. cit.*, chaps. vi and vii.

Wittenberg is not revealed, though, again like Chaucer's Clerk, it was apparently some branch of "philosophy." At all events, he had acquired some sort of doubt concerning ghosts; and he is clearly not only college-bred but also educated.

Such an Horatio, the young country gentleman preparing at college for a professional career, though doubtless known to the Prince, would hardly be his close associate at the university; and the evidence of Act I points to only a slight acquaintance.¹⁷ Horatio's suggestion that the coming of the Ghost be told to Hamlet springs apparently from his "duty" as a subject rather than from friendship; and the fear lest the Ghost harm the Prince occurs first to Marcellus. Gertrude does not class him with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as her son's intimates. Hamlet greets him merely as "fellow-student," not even as cordially as he greets the players, and indeed is not quite certain of his name; he asks him three times, as he did Rosencrantz and Guildenstern why he has returned to Denmark; and he accepts attendance at the late king's funeral as a convincing reason: in that case, if they were intimates, they would have traveled home together; and Horatio would hardly have been in Elsinore for those weeks since the funeral without seeing something of Hamlet. Hamlet, moreover, even though they had not seen one another, would surely have realized that Horatio would come, and therefore could hardly have been surprised at seeing him. At first, Hamlet does not trust either Horatio or Marcellus enough to reveal the message of the Ghost, but merely asks their "silence" concerning what they already know. This formal relationship in Act I, the use of pronouns vividly supports. Hamlet uses "you" to Horatio's friend Marcellus; and Marcellus uses "you" or "my lord" to Hamlet. In both quarto and standard texts, Hamlet addresses Horatio throughout the act as "you," except for one occurrence of the conventional "pray thee"; and Horatio speaks to Hamlet, first in the honorific third person, then with "you" after Hamlet has employed it. Surely this

¹⁷ Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 79, declares him, even in Act I, "the only friend he [Hamlet] has in the world."

formality of speech, in pointed contrast to Hamlet's early talk with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, shows the comparatively slight acquaintance between the Prince of Denmark and his countryman, the "poor" scholar of the University. Hamlet's later declaration of his preference for Horatio "Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice," cannot refer to any lengthy period: indeed, his two previous intimates had clearly been of his father's selection before he was old enough to choose—and they had not either of them troubled to come back to Denmark to attend that father's funeral.

During Act II, Shakespeare suppresses the role of Horatio, though in the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, he was present with Polonius and the players. Perhaps the dramatist had not time to show the ripening of this friendship on the stage; perhaps he wished to show that Horatio was not of the court, and so was less subject to the questioning of royalty. This new-sprung friendship, moreover, was apparently a secret; and, until Hamlet's return from England, the two have no words in public. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern seem never to guess this intimacy; and Horatio drops out of the talk when they come in. In the first quarto, Shakespeare omitted all the earlier dialogue that had appeared in the *Bestrafte Brudermord* between Horatio and the King; and, though he allowed one late in the third act with the Queen, he omitted even that in the standard version. Thus in Act III when Horatio reappears, the intimacy between him and Hamlet is already a *fait accompli*, though a secret to the others. Even the friend Marcellus is apparently told nothing, and drops out of the play—so single was Horatio's fidelity. To emphasize this change of relationship between the two, Shakespeare from Act I, where it was in the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, moved to Act III Hamlet's eulogy of Horatio's character, and greatly expanded it; and the speech in its new setting seems to point as much to the seeming falsity of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as to Horatio's loyalty. Now Hamlet has told him all. During the play-within-the-play, Horatio helps him watch the King; on his return from Denmark, he writes to Horatio at once; and, as

he dies, he asks Horatio to explain his doings to posterity and to cast his vote for Fortinbras as king. Horatio on his side shows equal intimacy: he fears Hamlet will lose the fencing bout, and frankly tells him so; he seems to act as his "second"; and, like a blood-brother, he wants to drain the poisoned goblet and die with his lord, and is restrained only by his lord's command. Throughout these later acts, in both quarto and folio versions, Hamlet calls his friend "good Horatio," and over twenty times uses the intimate forms of the pronoun or the verb; whereas the more formal "you" appears but twice in the folio text and in the first quarto not at all. Horatio addresses Hamlet with proper respect as "you" or as "my lord," until, at the catastrophe, death having leveled social differences, he utters the brief prayer:

Good night, sweet prince,
And flights of angels sing *thee* to *thy* rest.¹⁸

Thus Hamlet achieved a friendship deeper than all his merry hours with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Horatio then is a poor scholar of the University with whom Hamlet grew intimate off stage during the second act, probably after he had come to realize that he could not trust his two former associates. Horatio is singly and above all loyal to the Prince who has so honored him, and quite subordinates himself to his great patron: the Elizabethans could not have conceived of such a friendship in any other way; for birth and station ruled society. Though talkative enough with Bernardo and Marcellus, Horatio acts the listener with his lord, and even after he is known at court is wisely unobtrusive there. He takes praise modestly, and rarely offers an unasked opinion. He is quite different from the "Good lads," Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: he is not accustomed to carousals, says nothing to, or of, the players, and does not bandy doubtful jests. Indeed, his talk is sober, and his wit sparing and very dry. He certainly would make a better Puritan than the vain and ambitious Malvolio. His remarks, from his initial doubts about the Ghost to his comments on the death-warrant that Hamlet

¹⁸ The italics are mine.

forged, show a sharp and objective critical acumen. Unlike Hamlet, he would seem to realize that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not deserve the death they go to meet; he is slow to believe even Claudius an utter villain; and one wonders what he thought of Polonius and of Gertrude. He doubted the wisdom of the ill-timed fencing-match, and wanted to bring it to a speedy end; but apparently he realized that Hamlet could not refuse Laertes' challenge without giving the choleric young man even greater offense. In his concluding speech, he wished above all to prevent more "plots and errors," as, with remarkable insight, he termed the recent episodes. It is this objective, poised restraint, with its seemingly inexhaustible reserve, that Hamlet most admired in Horatio, "A man that fortune's buffets and rewards Has ta'en with equal thanks." He illustrates the perfect balance of "blood and judgment," of the passions and cold reason. The Elizabethans conceived of physical and mental health as just such a balance of the four bodily "humors"; and Horatio's quiet poise, even in the face of great events to which he was not used, suggests that Shakespeare in this play of secret passions and dark deeds employs his normal human nature as a foil to point the subtle contrast to Claudius, to Gertrude, and most of all to Hamlet, all of whom, under the continued strain of circumstance, become not quite their proper selves. Horatio is not truly merry and sanguine, like Rosencrantz, though this temperament would have been appropriate to his years, nor choleric like Laertes, nor phlegmatic, nor melancholy; and he is certainly far from the unstable, mercurial type that with little reason shifted from one humor to another. His bodily fluids and his consequent mental states show that poise and moderation that Aristotle thought the essence of human virtue. Thus he is truly the very man to cling to in perplexity and change, always at hand, sympathetic, silent, observant, unobtrusive, the ideal confidant and friend. He is indeed "without any ends of his own,"¹⁹ truly "one of the noblest and most beautiful of Shakespeare's male characters."²⁰

¹⁹ See Ulrici, in Furness var. *Hamlet*, II, 293.

²⁰ Hudson, in *Hamlet*, ed. cit., II, 179.

The present study has attempted to place Hamlet's three schoolfellows in relation to him and to one another, to show the ruin of two friendships and the growth of a third, to explain the seeming inconsistencies of Horatio's social status and his rise from an unknown figure at the Danish court to Hamlet's spokesman at the forthcoming "election" to the kingship. It has thrown light on Horatio's character as a man, and so on Hamlet's, showing a deepening conception of friendship, from a mere jovial *camaraderie* to a fidelity that lasts to death, with something of the old Germanic blood-brotherhood and something of the "Aristotelian" virtue of friendship that Spenser celebrated in the *Faerie Queene*. To Hamlet, such a fellowship came to have more reality than the bond between mother and son or between lover and beloved; for these did not seem to stand the test. Horatio then is not only Shakespeare's picture of a scholar but also his essay *de amicitia*; and, like so many writers of the Renaissance, the poet seems to have taken a special interest in this theme; for, even as he reduced Horatio's importance in the plot, he increased the number of his lines. Horatio, furthermore, is a foil to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who formerly had been "so neighbour'd to his [Hamlet's] youth and humour": he brings out the grace and charm natural to the Prince; and he represents the sobriety of a Hamlet grown suddenly mature—a rapid change sharply in contrast to the Prince's former gaiety that Gertrude and Ophelia miss so much and that Claudius would so gladly see return. The effort of the King and court to understand this change and to ascertain its cause is basic in the play. *Hamlet* is, to be sure, a tragedy of revenge, but shot through with this dramatic irony, that, of the major actors in the plot, none but Hamlet himself, and later Claudius, know that its basic motive *is* revenge; and this essential ignorance produces the "casual slaughter" of the later acts: because of it, Ophelia lends herself to Claudius's plots, is cast off by her lover, goes insane, and dies a suicide; Polonius tries to spy out the solution, and so meets accidental death; Gertrude unwittingly marries her husband's murderer, so forfeits her son's respect, and falls a

victim to the plots and counterplots; and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern come home to heal and are sent away to die. Only Horatio knows and so survives. Thus, like *Othello*, the play is a compound of dramatic ironies arising from a fundamental ignorance;²¹ and Hamlet, misinterpreting the efforts of his friends to cure him and believing them but spies, imposes upon this irony very naturally another irony: they do not know his motive; nor he, theirs. Misunderstanding, and thus dramatic irony, continue to the end; and only after the final curtain is rung down, does Horatio tell the true story to the "yet unknowing world." These several ironies of the several characters make the play, not merely one, but half a dozen tragedies: not only the guilty King, but Polonius, Ophelia, Gertrude, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, all struggling unwittingly against the unknown impossible, attempt to serve at once both Claudius and Hamlet; and all go to their deaths. Fine as this irony is, however, the original success of *Hamlet* must not be entirely ascribed to such stage-devices, even when combined with a wealth of thrilling episode: the tragedy is no mere melodrama; but, like Shakespeare's other plays about that time, it must have had for the Elizabethans a realism of character, even to minute and subtle shades, so convincing as to lend credence even to these extraordinary deeds. The King and Queen, soldiers like Marcellus, and courtiers like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, were Renaissance realities, speaking and acting as such would speak and act in similar circumstances; and the poor scholar Horatio, likewise, is depicted as in life, unobtrusive at the court, modest at Hamlet's praise, observant and critical and slow to final judgment, but frank and loyal to a fault to the great Prince who had honored him with trust and even friendship—indeed, a happy balance of those humors that according to Elizabethan science composed both physical and mental human nature.

²¹ See the present writer, "Mistaken Identity in Shakespeare's Comedies," *R. A. A.*, April, 1934.

CHAPTER III

LORD CHAMBERLAIN POLONIUS

IN THE judgment of Prince Hamlet, Polonius had long since reached his dotage, if, indeed, he had ever been better than a fool. Not only in scenes of pretended lunacy does Hamlet treat him with rudeness and contempt, even casting slurs upon his honesty; but, in moments obviously lucid, he calls him a "great baby" already in his second childhood, and openly ridicules his dramatic taste. In an aside, moreover—and asides were supposed to express the sincere opinions of the speaker—he puts him in the class of "tedious old fools," and over his murdered corpse delivers the famous epitaph, "Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell." Although Hamlet "repents" him of this deed, and although he warns the players not to "mock" Polonius, as he himself has done, yet he unquestionably despises him. In sharp contrast is the attitude of the King and Queen. In Elizabethan drama, the first appearance of a character generally strikes the keynote of his personality and position in the play; and Polonius first comes to the attention of the audience in the King's speech to Laertes:

The head is not more native to the heart,
The hand more instrumental to the mouth,
Than is the throne of Denmark to thy father.

The King defers to him not only about Laertes' trip to France, but also on the urgent matter of Hamlet's madness, says that he has always been "the father of good news," declares that he has never given bad advice, compares him to "the pith of life," says that he "loved" him, describes him as "faithful and honourable," calls him "dear my lord," and "good" Polonius, and even "thou" and "thyself." He trusts him to overhear Gertrude's conversation with her son, is filled with "discord and dismay" at his untoward death, and is "most sensible in grief for it." Even discounting these statements for politeness

and policy, Claudius clearly thought his chamberlain a valuable public servant. The Queen, likewise, listens with some conviction to Polonius' views on Hamlet's madness, treats him at times even with deference, and, like Claudius, calls him a "good old man." This is an utter contradiction of interpretations: whereas Hamlet casts a slur on Polonius' honesty, Claudius and Gertrude find him "good" and "faithful"; and, whereas Hamlet treats him like a dotard and a fool, the King and Queen praise his wisdom, rely on his advice, and give him every mark of favor. These conceptions of Polonius are as different as Cicero's eulogy of old age in the *De Senectute* and Lucian's satire of it in the *De Luctu*. But which conception did the Elizabethan audience accept? Hamlet's perhaps, because he is the hero of the play; but Claudius, though technically the villain, spoke to the Renaissance with all the prestige of the "divinity" that "doth hedge a king"; he holds more consistently to his view than Hamlet does to his; Gertrude and the whole court countenance it; and its frequent repetition in the play suggests that Shakespeare wished to give it special emphasis.

This complete disagreement of interpretation marks the attitude not only of Hamlet and of Claudius toward the Lord Chamberlain, but also of modern critics, although they have discussed him more than any other figure in the play outside the title role. On the one hand, Sir E. K. Chambers, voicing an opinion common since the time of Horn (1823), describes Polonius as "a played out state official, vain and slow-witted, pattering words of wisdom which he does not understand and cannot put into practice";¹ and, even more recently, Walley, apparently on the authority of Hamlet's epithet "intruding," calls him a "meddling counsellor."² In utter disagreement, Tieck (1824) sees in him "a real statesman. Discreet, politic, keen-sighted, ready at the council board, cunning upon occasions, he has been valued by the deceased king, and is now indispensable to his successor." More recently, Löning,³ and

¹ E. K. Chambers, *Shakespeare* (New York, 1926), p. 187.

² H. R. Walley, "Shakespeare's Conception of 'Hamlet,'" *PMLA*, XLVIII, 778.

³ R. Löning, *Die Hamlet-Tragödie Shakespeares* (Stuttgart, 1893).

to some extent Schücking,⁴ would seem to hold this view; Scherer, though he thinks Polonius a self-seeking politician, certainly does not consider him a dotard or a fool;⁵ Professor Kittredge describes him as a "benevolent diplomatist and devoted father";⁶ and Professor Dover Wilson declares him "neither stupid nor clumsy."⁷ Some critics, apparently disturbed by this antinomy, give up his character as hopelessly inconsistent; and, though Hazlitt long ago defended him against this charge, Schücking nevertheless repeats it. Scholars, indeed, seem to depend too largely on the statements either of Hamlet or of Claudius, without taking into full account Polonius' own words and deeds; and the conclusion that one of the chief characters in Shakespeare's greatest tragedy is inconsistent should be accepted only after all other theories have been found untenable.

Polonius is indeed one of the chief characters in the tragedy, even though, according to Benedix, his conversations with Laertes and Reynaldo are extraneous to the plot,⁸ and even though Professor Waldock's recent *Hamlet* manages to ignore him.⁹ Although he dies in the middle of the play, yet in eight of its twenty scenes, he has a speaking part; he guides the actions of Ophelia, and to some extent those of the King and Queen; and his sudden death, especially in its effect upon Laertes, is a main cause of the catastrophe. He is, furthermore, almost entirely Shakespeare's own creation, and, as such, can hardly be without importance. In Belleforest, he is merely a "counsellor" who hides himself to hear Hamlet's talk with Gertrude. In the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, he has the name Corambus, and is perhaps something of a dotard; and Hamlet, in pretended lunacy, calls him an "old fool" to his face; but there is little of his private character, nothing of his family, and no realistic depiction of his high place at court. In the first quarto, under the name Corambis, the Shakespearean

⁴ L. L. Schücking, *Character Problems* (New York, 1922), p. 100.

⁵ B. Scherer, "Polonius der Typus des Senilen," *Anglia*, LIV, 149.

⁶ G. L. Kittredge, *Shakspeare* (Cambridge, 1924), p. 38.

⁷ J. Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet* (New York, 1935), p. 131.

⁸ *Hamlet*, Furness var. ed., II, 351.

⁹ Schücking, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

conception first appears; and later quartos and the folio merely elaborate it.

This Shakespearean Polonius, so much fuller and more vivid than its sources, must owe its added vividness to Shakespeare's own immediate observation; for a role that combined courtier and lord chamberlain must truly hold the mirror up to very nature if it would be convincing to an audience of the City and the Court. Shakespeare, moreover, especially in the plays that just precede and follow *Hamlet*, greatly enriched his sources from the luxuriant panorama of Elizabethan life, giving them not only detail of setting and significance of theme, but also full realistic portraits of contemporary types, where his originals supplied him with hardly a suggestion. The Elizabethans thought of a man, moreover, not as an individual but as the member of a social class; and social classes were sharply differentiated; for the economic pressure of the age forced upon the individual, as appears in contemporary books of "characters," a rather strict conformity to type. Polonius is a courtier, a minister of state, and the father of a family; and, in each of these aspects, his own words and actions, as well as the attitude of others toward him, should be weighed in the scales of Elizabethan customs and ideals.

Polonius as courtier and lord chamberlain seems to run true to the contemporary type. Like Falstaff and Malvolio and Orlando and Timon, he has a definitely suggested past; and his more sprightly accomplishments apparent in the play are relics of this *belle jeunesse*. The Corambus of the *Bestrafte Brudermord* had been "plagued" with love in his youth. In the first quarto, Corambis, in his early days, had been very "idle"; and the later texts translate this vague and doubtful epithet into an education appropriate to a future career at court. By 1600, the medieval knightly ideal had so far given away to Humanism that some sort of learning, though unobtrusively employed, was needful to a courtier;¹⁰ for, as diplo-

¹⁰ R. Kelso, *The English Gentleman of the Sixteenth Century* (Urbana, Ill., 1929), p. 114.

macy took the place of war,¹¹ kings were surrounded less by soldiery and more by crafty counsellors; and even war by then required learning, especially the mathematics of artillery.¹² Polonius, therefore, like most sons of Elizabethan nobles,¹³ went for a few years to the "university," probably to the University of Paris; for he sent Laertes thither, and he seems to be acquainted with Parisian dress and customs. Here or at court, he learned the contemporary technique of lovemaking and suffered from its effects. For a courtier, the arts of pleasing were the most practical studies; and, just as Laertes is to "ply his music," so Polonius gave his own college days to drama: he learned something of Seneca and Plautus, he took the star role of Julius Caesar, presumably in a Latin dramatization of Caesar's assassination,¹⁴ and was "accounted a good actor." Though his taste excites Hamlet's ridicule, yet he knows dramatic types, and holds definite opinions on diction, on acting, and on declamation. He seems to be a born showman, with a sense of surprise and climax, though Hamlet, who cultivates rudeness as a symptom of insanity, tries to spoil his fine prologue to the advent of the actors, and even plays on him his own trick of suspense by breaking the thread of discourse with irrelevant remarks. Such combating of wits gives the play comic relief without detracting from the atmosphere proper to a court. The youth of Polonius, in short, and his education in the arts of pleasing were the usual preparation for a career close to the person of the sovereign.

Either this education was strangely miscalculated in its effects, however, or some critics of Polonius have been peculiarly shortsighted; for the Lord Chamberlain's wit, his use of climax and suspense and his pithy moralistic sayings have often been described as stupid and ill-timed. This is a serious charge against an Elizabethan courtier. To parley euphuism had been recently the fashion; and an Elizabethan gentleman was sup-

¹¹ To effect this substitution was of course Machiavelli's ideal. See also J. Randol, *Noble Blastus* (London, 1633).

¹² See the present writer, "Captain General Othello," *Anglia*, XLIII, 296.

¹³ Kelso, *op. cit.*, pp. 121-122.

¹⁴ Perhaps a reference to *Caesar Interfectus*, played at Oxford in 1582.

posed to be master, not only of Latin prose, but also of the "colors" of English rhetoric.¹⁵ The office of chamberlain, moreover, the most personal of servants in the ordinary household,¹⁶ carried with it, in the court of Elizabeth, the control of the theaters and the revels, so that the Lord Chamberlain was in effect entertainer-in-chief to royalty.¹⁷ In the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, the King clearly enjoyed the witticisms of Corambus, even those apparently most unseasonable. In Shakespeare, Polonius is usually quite matter-of-fact; he is always so with Ophelia, Laertes, and Reynaldo; his exhibitions of word-play seem to be purely a part of his technique as a courtier; and his only extensive flights are his discourses on "majesty" and "true madness." These speeches may weary modern ears; but the Elizabethans relished word-play for itself, no matter what the occasion: Hamlet puns even on his relationship to his uncle-father; and Lady Macbeth improves even the occasion of Duncan's murder likewise with a pun. Gertrude, to be sure, asks for "More matter, with less art"; but her request arises, not apparently from boredom, but from impatience to hear the cause of her son's madness. Polonius, on the other hand, as long as he can, restrains her anxious haste, partly because he is a good showman and so wants to make his great discovery the climax of the business of the day, and partly because a prime minister whose daughter is having a secret love affair with the Crown Prince would do well to break the news of it to the royal parents with all due care and circumspection. As the contemporary concern over the love affairs of Mary Queen of Scots and of Elizabeth amply show, a royal union was a matter of national importance. Indeed, Polonius had reason to fear the "hate" of Claudius when this knowledge came to his ears, and so must feel his way lest he be overwhelmed in a burst of royal wrath, either because he had not stopped the love affair more quickly, or because, in

¹⁵ Kelso, *op. cit.*, pp. 131-132; Laurentius Grimaldus [*sic*] for Grimalius, *De Optimo Senatore* (Venice, 1568), tr. Eng. 1598. See I. Gollancz, *Pro. Brit. Acad.* (1904), pp. 199 ff.

¹⁶ N. Breton, *Forté of Fancie*, in *Works*, ed. Grosart, I, 12, *passim*.

¹⁷ *Shakespeare's England* (Oxford, 1917), I, 85.

stopping it, he had driven the Prince insane. From both these possible charges, he carefully defends his daughter's conduct and his own, and yet tactfully avoids blaming the errant Prince. He first reminds the King and Queen that he understands and respects the prerogatives of "majesty," and that, for this very reason, he went "round to work," ended the love affair, and so inadvertently made Hamlet mad. In defense of Ophelia, he even strains the truth by saying that she had told him of Hamlet's "soliciting, As they fell out by time, by means and place," and so explains the unhappy consequences as due, so far as he was concerned, to loyalty and diligence, and not to any fault of his or of Ophelia's. Even supposing that his wit did fail as wit, as diplomacy it was clearly a success in saving him in a dangerous crisis, as any Elizabethan from a mere hint would understand. Indeed, so successful was he that later in the play Gertrude herself even suggests the marriage of Hamlet and Ophelia. Thus, in the tactful management of his royal lord and his Queen, Polonius succeeds in being both gracious and astute.

The high position of Lord Chamberlain required Polonius not only to amuse royalty and on occasion to break difficult news but also at all times to be ready with maxims and advice. His sententious vein has been the object of contemptuous criticism; and some have even ridiculed his prudential counsels to Laertes, forgetting that just such aphorisms appear in books of parental advice by popular writers such as Nicholas Breton and William Martin and by men of the world such as Sir Walter Raleigh and Lord Burleigh. Many of his sayings, indeed, unfortunately for him, reflect opinions so typical of the Renaissance as to disagree with the democracy and the individualism of more recent times: the obedience of child to parent and of subject to king. Not only the position of Polonius as a minister and the head of a family but also his ripe years made the didactic style appropriate to his speech; and, as contemporary collections of aphorisms amply show,¹⁸

¹⁸ See L. B. Wright, *Middle-Class Culture in Elizabethan England* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1935), pp. 130, 147, 228, 245-246.

a penchant for moral philosophy was essential to the ideal gentleman. Indeed, such courtesy-writers as Vives, Castiglione, and Elyot particularly held up to emulation the philosopher-statesman; and Earle, in discussing "A Good Old Man,"¹⁹ declared: "His old sayings and morals seem proper to his beard." Gertrude herself describes Polonius in these very words, as a "good old man"; and surely the expression conveyed great praise, for in 1589 Queen Elizabeth wrote to her trusty counsellor Shrewsbury, addressing him as her "very good old man." Polonius, therefore, as a gentleman, as a minister, and as a man of age and experience, is doing merely what was expected of him; and York in *Richard II* and Gonzalo in *The Tempest* likewise illustrate the moral generalizations in the high style of Seneca that were supposed to be on the lips of every counsellor.²⁰ The Elizabethans, moreover, certainly approved and apparently enjoyed, these sententious truisms; for their literary tradition from Anglo-Saxon times to Lyly's *Euphues* attests the popularity of gnomic subject-matter. If the maxims of Polonius seem trite to us, it is because they are so sage and terse as to have passed into common proverbs: "Neither a borrower nor a lender be," and "Brevity is the soul of wit." If these apothegms are not both shrewd and aptly phrased, then the many generations that have quoted them have been no judges. Indeed, even Sir E. K. Chambers calls them "words of wisdom," in the very sentence in which he describes Polonius as "slow-witted." The reaction of other characters in the play, moreover, shows that the Elizabethans considered them both pointed and appropriate. Laertes and Ophelia take them as good sentences and well pronounced; they are not unlike the advice of Burleigh and Sir Henry Sidney to their sons; and, when Polonius comments on hypocrisy, the King exclaims in an aside: "How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!" Shakespeare's changing his name, moreover, from Corambus, which seems to mean "tedious iteration" to Polonius, which seems to refer to the famous

¹⁹ Earle, *Microcosmographie*, No. LVI.

²⁰ See C. R. Sleeth, "Shakespeare's Ministers of State," *R. A. A.*, XIII, 97 ff.

statesman Grimalius, suggests a higher conception of his character than the feeble old man of the *Bestrafte Brudermord*. Certainly to the Elizabethans, the moralizing of Polonius showed him neither a dotard nor a fool.

The Renaissance, with its keen sense of official dignity, would doubtless see Polonius pre-eminently as a minister of state. In the standard version of the play, he is more appropriately urbane and dignified than in the *Bestrafte Brudermord* or even in the first quarto, where he orders the King about in quite uncourtly fashion. He has become truly a noble to the manner born; his lineage and deserts are such that Gertrude would even match his daughter to her son; the commons, moreover, chose Laertes for their king; and Fortinbras apparently includes him among the "princes" killed in the course of the play. Polonius, furthermore, is much beloved; and his sudden death and obscure burial "In hugger-mugger" without funeral rites, outrage the nation as a whole. Unless one can fool all of the people all the time, the critics are surely wrong who find in him only a vain and self-seeking politician. Hamlet himself, though calling him a "knave," can point to no specific knavery. Like Burleigh, Polonius has "hunted the trail of policy" for years; and he pointedly appeals to his long experience in statecraft. Well might the King be filled with "discord and dismay" when the Crown Prince kills him; and his death is quickly followed by the ruin of the dynasty. Indeed, Polonius as prime minister is generally respected and esteemed.

His purely political acts, moreover, do not contradict this general approbation: he takes his part in the diplomatic settlement of Fortinbras' revolt; and his failure to find the cause of Hamlet's madness is quite excusable; for he knows nothing of the antecedent regicide, and so could hardly guess, as Claudius could, at Hamlet's actual motive. Perhaps he jumps too quickly to the conclusion that the Prince is mad for love; but such an explanation to the Elizabethans was very natural: Hamlet himself implies it in the love letter to Ophelia; she certainly believes it; and the King and Queen seriously con-

sider it. Love-melancholy leading to insanity—Chaucer's "maladye of hereos"—was recognized alike in medieval literature and medicine;²¹ and also in the Renaissance, learned physicians such as Andreas Laurentius,²² Bright,²³ and Burton²⁴ treat seriously of the complaint; the very title of the *Orlando Furioso* is an expression of the theory; and Shakespeare's Romeo,²⁵ Jaques, and Orsino²⁶ reflect it as a commonplace of English popular opinion. Indeed, although Hamlet's lunacy is clearly feigned, his love for Ophelia affected him so deeply that in the burial scene he loses all poise and sense of propriety so that he is later ashamed of his impetuosity. Polonius himself in youth had suffered from lovesickness; and his diagnosis of Hamlet's madness is too truly Elizabethan to be proof of dotage. Except for this one mistake, indeed, he manages this difficult situation most astutely, arranging for Hamlet to be spied upon when he is most off his guard, in conversation with Ophelia or with Gertrude. He meets the rudeness of the Prince with tact and self-control, at the same time safeguarding his daughter and encouraging him in diversions as the King and Queen desire. The trip to England was not of his suggesting; for, not knowing of the regicide, he did not realize how dangerous Hamlet was, and so, apparently, would rather have kept the Prince under immediate observation at the court. This more diplomatic policy cost Polonius his life. In this scene in Gertrude's chamber, his actions are not only justified, but even admirable: he played the eavesdropper with Gertrude's knowledge and consent, in hopes of learning the cause of Hamlet's illness; and he risked his life to cry out and save his Queen from her violent son,

²¹ See J. L. Lowes "The Lovers Maladye of Heroes," *M.P.*, XI, 491 ff.

²² Andreas Laurentius, *Discourse on the Preservation of the Sight*, tr. Surplet (London, 1599), pp. 117 ff. (ed. princ., 1597).

²³ On Bright's *Treatise*, see Mary I. O'Sullivan, "'Hamlet' and Dr. Timothy Bright," *PMLA*, XLI, 667 ff.

²⁴ See E. Bensley, *C. H. E. L.*, IV, 281-282.

²⁵ See the present author, "Shakespeare's 'Star-Crossed Lovers,'" *R.E.S.*, about to appear; and John Cole, "Romeo and Rosaline," *Neophil.*, about to appear.

²⁶ See the present writer, "The Melancholy Duke Orsino," *Bulletin of the Johns Hopkins Institute of the History of Medicine*, Nov., 1938.

and so directed that violence to himself. What can Scherer say to this final proof of loyalty? Was such a counsellor merely "meddlesome"?²⁷

Of all virtues, indeed, the one perhaps most valued in those tumultuous times was loyalty, loyalty of son to father as expressed in Hamlet, loyalty of subject to king as expressed in Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Polonius. Shakespeare himself had previously celebrated this virtue among the servant class;²⁸ and Polonius, as a servant of the state, rephrases it fervently:

I hold my duty as I hold my soul,
Both to my God and to my gracious king.

Just so did Lord Treasurer Burleigh refer to "the duty I owe to God and to my sovereign Queen."²⁹ Breton contrasts an "Vnworthie" with a "Worthie Priuie Counceller," the former a bad adviser to royalty and a hypocrite in religion, the latter "a pillar of a realme, in whose wisdome and care vnder God and the king, stands the safety of the kingdome."³⁰ King James, likewise, required that ministers of the Crown be "men of knowen wisdome, honestie and good conscience."³¹ Bacon described courtiers "in great place" as "thrice servants: servants of the sovereign or state; servants of fame; and servants of business." Polonius is a true servant of the Renaissance absolutist state, and boasts of his duty to his king; the "business" that his place requires of him he dispatches with as much speed as tact allows; and the "fame" that he leaves behind him in the remembrance of royalty, court, and commons is something that those who would despise him must needs explain away.

Polonius as father of Ophelia and Laertes is almost as important in the play as Polonius the Lord Chamberlain; and this realistic depiction of his family life is entirely Shake-

²⁷ Walley, *loc. cit.*, p. 778.

²⁸ See the present writer, "Shakespeare's Rustic Servants," *Sh. Jhb.*, LXIX, 87.

²⁹ M. S. Rawson, *Bess of Hardwick* (New York, 1910), p. 167.

³⁰ N. Breton, *The Good and the Badde* (London, 1616).

³¹ James I, *Political Works*, ed. Mcllwain (Cambridge, Mass., 1918), p. 32. See also Grimalius, *loc. cit.*

speare's own. In the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, Corambus was quite willing for his son to return to Paris, and even grew witty on the subject to the King. Shakespeare makes him more fatherly: in the first quarto, Laertes's going is described as a "forced grant"; and both Corambis in the first quarto and Polonius in the standard version declare that they "love" Ophelia "passing well." Especially in the standard text, Polonius takes pains to safeguard the family standing and Ophelia's honor. Of course, he looks forward, as any good Elizabethan father should, to marrying her off as soon as possible.³² When he commands as a parent or speaks in the presence of royalty, he quite properly addresses her by the more formal "you"; but, on more intimate occasions, he lapses into the affectionate "thou"; and these subtle changes suggest a happy combination of family discipline and parental love. Ophelia, in return, shows him unfailing respect, calling him "you" or commonly "my lord"; and this respect was not without a deep affection, evidenced in her bitter grief at his death and in the madness that seems to have sprung from it.

Toward Laertes, Polonius exerts no less authority, though in a different way, and likewise gains both his respect and filial love. He gives him clear-cut, shrewd advice, and sends Reynaldo to see that it is followed. Polonius has been blamed for thus spying upon his son; but, especially in that age when privilege of rank overrode college rules, a student—and most students were very young—might tread what primrose path he would, without the knowledge of his parents, but for such visits of "his father's man";³³ and "good Reynaldo," who seems to be, not a common servant,³⁴ but a gentleman serving-man, like Fabyan in *Twelfth Night*,³⁵ a trusted and tried retainer whom Polonius even dignifies by calling "sir," is quite the proper person to send on such a mission. Shakespeare, indeed, probably inserted this scene, partly to express the pas-

³² C. L. Powell, *English Domestic Relations* (New York, 1917), p. 14, *passim*.

³³ Earle, *Microsmographie*, No. XXV. Cf. Kelso, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

³⁴ *Hamlet*, ed. J. Q. Adams, p. 231.

³⁵ See the present author, "Olivia's Household," *PMLA*, XLIX, 797.

sage of time,³⁶ and partly to show the father's appropriate concern over the welfare of his son, and thus more fully to motivate Laertes' fury at the old man's death. Polonius understands Laertes thoroughly: he attributes to him "The flash and outbreak of a fiery mind," a choleric temperament with more of "blood" (i.e., passion) than judgment, quite different from Horatio's balanced temper; and, in the latter scenes, Laertes amply displays this rash impetuosity. Polonius realizes the need of allowing him a larger tether than he does Ophelia; and, in accordance with contemporary custom and the double moral standard of the age, he permits his son to indulge in "drinking, fencing, swearing, quarrelling, Drabing," and such "slight sullies." Nevertheless in both the first quarto and the later texts, he insists that Laertes should "ply his music." He seems fond of this son whose merry youth doubtless reminds him of his own; and, in the scene that first presents the relations between the two, Polonius appears as yielding very reluctantly to Laertes' "laboursome petition" to return to France. Occasionally, the father lapses into the intimate "thee" and "thou," as in "my blessing with thee"; and Laertes, with appropriate respect, calls him "my lord." To this careful and affectionate upbringing, the son responds like a "good child"; he seems glad to take a "second leave" and have a "double blessing"; and, like his father, he improves the occasion with an aphorism. After Polonius' death, his fiery nature expresses love for his "noble" parent most ironically by trying to overthrow the dynasty that Polonius lived and died to serve; and doubtless the remembrance of his father's fidelity to that dynasty helped Claudius to regain the outraged son's support. What the mother of this family was like, one can glean only from Laertes' reference to her "chaste and unsmirched brow"; but, concerning the father, there is ample testimony; and those who would call Polonius a fool must take into account his notable success in holding both the respectful obedience and the profound affection of two such different children. Laertes, indeed, though in the disillusioned period of adolescence, cer-

³⁶ See T. M. Raysor, "Shakespeare's Handling of Time," *S. P.*, XXXII, 197 ff.

tainly considered his father an object neither of contempt nor of derision.

As courtier, as Lord Chamberlain, as *pater familias*, therefore, Polonius shows evidence of acumen rather than of dotage; and he is obviously far from the condition of King Lear. Though Shakespeare knew the symptoms of senile dementia and depicted them elsewhere, Scherer cannot find that he gave Polonius any of the characteristics of the disease.³⁷ Polonius, moreover, was probably younger than some critics would seem to think. In the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, Hamlet called him "old," and in the standard text says that he is a "great baby" in his "second childhood." This is doubtless mere prejudice, like the "Slanders" against old age that Hamlet mentions; and Ophelia's song "His beard is white as snow" may, or may not, apply to Polonius. More convincing evidence is the Queen's reference to him as "old"; but that epithet did not mean quite the same to the Elizabethans as it does today. During the last three centuries, human life has greatly lengthened; among the Elizabethans, dancing and tourneys had to be laid aside with "age" at thirty-five; and a courtier, in "the decline of his age" at forty was advised to retire to his estates to conceal his bodily decay.³⁸ Hard living conditions and neglected teeth hastened the coming of physical infirmity,³⁹ and most men might be described as physically "old" long before the advent of mental dotage, which was thought to come about the middle sixties.⁴⁰ Polonius, to be sure, once loses the thread of his somewhat complicated

³⁷ Scherer, *op. cit.*, pp. 149 ff. See also the present writer, "The Old Age of King Lear," about to appear.

³⁸ *Cyulle and Vncyulle Life*, ed. Hazlitt, *Roxb. Lib.* (London, 1868), p. 75 (ed. princ., 1579); E. Tilney, *Flower of Friendship* (London, 1568), sig. B iiij r; [?I.M.], *General Practise of Medicine* (London, 1634), sig. B 2 v; L. Lemnie, *Touchstone of Complexions* (London, 1581), leaf 89 v *et passim*; and *The Most Excellent Booke of Arcandam* (London, 1592), sig. M 2 v.

³⁹ *Batman upon Bartholome* (London, 1538), leaves 70 v and 71 r; Boaystuaue, *Theatrum Mundi* (London, 1574), pp. 212 ff.; and Mornay, *Antonius* (London, 1592), prefatory "Discourse," sig. D i r.

⁴⁰ Lemnie, *op. cit.*, 30 r; and Henry Cuffe, *The Differences of the Ages of Mans Life* (London, 1607), p. 120. Ben Jonson wrote his "dotages" about the age of sixty.

discourse in giving directions to Reynaldo; and forgetfulness was a recognized symptom of old age;⁴¹ but his memory is quite clear for all the tangled web of domestic and foreign intrigue of which he is the center.

Some evidence even suggests a comparatively young and vigorous Polonius. The Elizabethans associated different ages with the predominance of different bodily "humors" and with certain physical and mental symptoms. These schemes show some divergence; but a cold, dry melancholy is generally imputed to great age; and certainly, Polonius does not show symptoms of melancholy. The glimpses that the play affords of his merry youth suggest a naturally sanguine temper like that of Rosencrantz; but if it was so, his age and the stress of his high position have greatly modified this natural bent. In the royal presence, to be sure, he could show only a poised and measured temperament consistent with courtly etiquette; but, in his household, his sharp rebukes to Ophelia suggest the choleric disposition that would belong more properly to late maturity. The *Most Excellent Booke of Arcandam* briefly sums up old age and its several parts:

The youth or flourishing age of mans state, which endureth till fūe & thirty yeares, is of a hot and dry temperature. The fourth age is the first part of old age, which endureth till 49. yeares, & then men begin to waxe cold, and dry, and like vnto a plant that dryeth vp and wythereth, and they be called in Latine *senes*. The second part of old age endureth vntil the end of life: and then men bee called in Latine *Seniores*. And this age also is deuided into 2 or three degrees. They that be in the first degree haue yet their greene old age, which yet may handle and execute ciuil matters. They be of a second degree, which draw themselves by little & little from the sayde affayres, because of their weaknesse. They of the third degree are in most extreame feeblenes.⁴²

Thus, even in "greene old age" after the fiftieth year, one should be able to "execute ciuil matters"; and the age of Ophelia and Laertes suggests that Polonius was well under sixty. Since life was short and the succession of great houses

⁴¹ Lemnie, *op. cit.*, leaves 69 v, 75 v, and 120 v.

⁴² *Arcandam, op. cit.*, sig. M 2 v. Cf. Lemnie, *op. cit.*, leaves 29 v and 30 r.

must be secure, Elizabethan nobles were married early by their parents, the girls in their 'teens, the men usually in their twenties;⁴³ Laertes, moreover, who is but a "youth" at college is probably not twenty, and certainly not much older;⁴⁴ and thus, if his father married at the usual time of life, Polonius would seem to be in his late forties, or at the most, in his fifties, a period that might well show some slight bodily decay, but hardly mental senility. One doubts, moreover, whether even his bodily decay was far advanced: he does not show the "slow gate" of old age;⁴⁵ for he hurries hither and yon across the stage, ushering in ambassadors, keeping an eye on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and Hamlet, as well as on his own family, and ever ready at the royal call. If his voice, furthermore, had the "feble and slender" accents of senility,⁴⁶ as some actors would interpret it, Hamlet in the scene in his mother's closet would not have mistaken it for the King's. The evidence, in short, seems clearly to indicate that Polonius still enjoyed his mental, and perhaps even his physical, powers unimpaired.

Polonius is one of Shakespeare's many full-length portraits. To the Elizabethan playgoers, his family background, his rearing, his days at the university, taken up, like those of Rosencrantz, so largely at the theater, and his later life as courtier and as chamberlain, must all have been clearly evident from the words and actions of the tragedy. They enjoyed his wit per se, and understood the diplomatic use to which he put it; they approved his nice, pat aphorisms; they appreciated the diplomatic triumph over Fortinbras at the beginning of the play; they noted the Chamberlain's influence with the King and Queen, as courtiers of the age daily noted Burleigh's gain or loss of prestige; and they doubtless accepted his death as causing the extinction of his family, the downfall of the dynasty, and so the catastrophe of the tragedy. In both public and private life, he showed acumen and determination; and

⁴³ See W. S. Davis, *Life in Elizabethan Days* (New York, 1930), pp. 93 and 99.

⁴⁴ *Hamlet*, Furness var. ed., I, 391 n.

⁴⁵ Lemnie, *op. cit.*, leaf 69 v.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, leaf 69 v.

he guided the careers of his children with as great care as he advised the King and Queen. Would a contemporary audience ignore all this evidence of fact vividly presented on the stage before their very eyes to accept at face value the vague slurs that Hamlet reiterates? Would they at all events conceive of Polonius as entirely a dotard and a knave? Everyone in the play but Hamlet seems to think highly of him. Contemporary courtesy books, and the criteria of Grimalius, King James, Bacon, Breton, and Earle would seem to show him not only as a realistic portrait of an official in "great place" but as a "Worthie Privie Councillor" and a "Good Old Man." His loyalty and political honesty are incontestable; and the keenness of his judgment can be doubted only on the ground of his mistake in attributing Hamlet's lunacy to love and of his losing the thread of discourse once with Reynaldo. On the other hand, he assists in crushing the revolt in Norway, skilfully avoids the dangers of Ophelia's love affair with Hamlet, and helps Claudius to test the nature and causes of the Prince's malady. He has his children's affection and respect; and his death brings them to ruin and carries with it a revolution in the state. His high reputation implies that he at least had been a great prime minister; and those who would call him a fool by mere senility must prove him older than the evidence suggests. If any reader still questions this interpretation of Polonius as a pillar of the state and as a dignified and amiable old man, let him remember that in Shakespeare's own day the part belonged to John Heminge, whose repertory also included the good Duke in *As You Like It*, the stately Brabantio in *Othello*, and Escalus, Flavius, Kent, and Ross.⁴⁷

If all the characters in the tragedy except Hamlet and Horatio are fools or knaves or both, the play can hardly be the life-like and significant drama that generations of readers have declared it. With such an abnormal *dramatis personæ*, it could not achieve, to an audience that knew the court of Queen Elizabeth, the verisimilitude of high tragedy. The

⁴⁷ See T. W. Baldwin, *Origin and Personnel of the Shakespearean Company* (Princeton, 1927), Plate III, facing p. 229.

court-life of the play, on the contrary, must approximate the contemporary norm: diplomacy is managed in the high style of Machiavelli; "Young Osric" has the airs and graces of a contemporary courtier; the reference to the child-players is unquestionably timely; Horatio and the Queen are true to life; the gravediggers are generally recognized as a realistic study in the genre; the theme of the play reflects contemporary political theory;⁴⁸ and Polonius himself is the gamsesome Rosencrantz and the devoted Guildenstern matured in years. Even Hamlet's biased judgment of him is part of the realism of the piece: under the circumstances, would not the Prince think the very worst of all the followers and courtiers of his regicide uncle and his incestuous aunt-mother?

Thus Polonius appears in two contrasting views; and Hamlet, in his interpretation, stands out single, *contra mundum*. This contrast apparently grew under Shakespeare's hand: it is more evident in the first quarto than in the *Bestrafte Brudermord*; and even more, in the standard version; for, as Shakespeare made Polonius more eminent and courtly, and filled in his background as a noble and a Lord Chamberlain, he also increased the number and the vehemence of Hamlet's satiric comments. Shakespeare then intended the spectators to see Polonius both in himself and through the Prince's eyes, just as they see Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Gertrude, and to some degree Ophelia, to all of whom Hamlet unfairly attributes evil motives. How else could Shakespeare show his hero's poignant disillusion than by this Swiftean bitterness, so keen against those whom he had previously respected? If art be great in proportion as it expresses in its medium the intricate truths of nature, then the complex personality in drama is higher art than the depiction of the simple, usually conventional, stock character; and Iago, for example, is a more masterly tragic figure than Richard III. This progress toward complexity of delineation is obvious in Shakespeare's development as a playwright. Not only, however, is the human mind

⁴⁸ See the present writer, "Political Themes in Shakespeare's Later Plays," *J. E. G. Ph.*, XXXV, 61 ff.

complex, but human social relationships—in which drama particularly deals—are also intricate: there are all shades of friendship and of enmity, of understanding and of misunderstanding. In *Hamlet*, more perhaps than in any other play, Shakespeare seems to try to set forth this intricacy of relationship; and most of the major characters appear in two contrasting lights: in their actual, or at least generally accepted, selves, and in the traits and motives that the hero, from his biased angle, attributes to them. This is indeed a holding of the mirror up to the complexities of very nature, even at the dire risk of confusion of the audience; and it constitutes a dramatic *tour de force* of utmost difficulty. Elsewhere, on a smaller scale, Shakespeare achieves it in subtly contrasting Iago's view of Desdemona and Othello with the actuality; and Ibsen, in *An Enemy of the People*, makes the very theme of his play this contrast between the conventional attitude and a given individual's point of view toward local society and institutions; but even Ibsen, though he probably wrote for a more highly educated audience, was widely misunderstood.

In Shakespeare, furthermore, three centuries of changing conditions and ideals have clouded these nuances of contrast: to us, Iago has become a mere heavy villain; and so, in *Othello*, most critics accept the conventional view of most of the characters concerning the Moor and Desdemona, and refuse to recognize that Iago has even something of a case.⁴⁹ Quite the opposite in *Hamlet*, romantic criticism has made the title role so intensely sympathetic that, as in the Ibsen play, we moderns are inclined to disregard the commonplace judgments of the other characters and of the age, not only with respect to Claudius but also with most of his associates, and accept all Hamlet's accusations at face value. Had Shakespeare so much of rebellion against established order as this would presuppose? Did the Shakespeare who ridiculed Malvolio for trying to rise in the social scale turn at once from *Twelfth Night* to a Hamlet to whom he gives unqualified praise for upsetting society? The Renaissance feared anarchy, and so detested

⁴⁹ See the present writer, "Honest Iago," *PMLA*, XLVI, 724.

even the idea of social change. Polonius, of all the characters in *Hamlet*, most represents the maintenance of the established *status quo*. To the Elizabethans, *Hamlet* was not a mere Gothic romance set in a place that never was, but an intense reality expressed in terms of a court-life that they knew; and the strictness of dramatic censorship attests to the close association in the popular mind between dramatic spectacle and contemporary life. Polonius was more than the ally of the villain against the hero of the play: he was an Elizabethan courtier, an Elizabethan father, an Elizabethan noble in high office; and, in all these characters, he was not far removed from the Elizabethan ideal of what a courtier, what a father, what a "Worthie Priuie Counciller" should be.

Hamlet (that is Shakespeare)
 distrusted Polonius because
 she had served King Hamlet
 and so quickly changed
 to the service of Claudius -
 Hamlet's deadly enemy.
 Hamlet hated anyone
 who seemed to come
 between him and his
 revenge, so Polonius
 must not be judged
 by Hamlet's view of him.

CHAPTER IV

OPHELIA AND LAERTES

NOT ONLY Polonius himself and his household, but especially his children, Ophelia and Laertes, run true to Elizabethan type in their motives¹ and actions and in their relations to one another, to their father and to the royal family that he served. Elizabethan parents received respect and obedience: Hamlet, even in his bitterness at her recent marriage, declared to his mother, "I shall in all my best obey you, madam"; and especially the father, as the responsible head of the clan-family, occupied a position of veneration well illustrated in Hamlet's attitude toward the Ghost. Indeed, Lord John Talbot addressed his father as "My most humble duty remembered, right honorable my singular good Lord and father."² In the Middle Ages, boys and girls had been put out as pages and ladies-in-waiting in the overlord's household;³ and even their parents treated them as little more than "servants."⁴ This state of affairs was still widely prevalent;⁵ and Peacham exclaimed over parents' neglect of their children's education;⁶ but some households, like that of Polonius, exhibited not only "colde friendship" but also "naturall loue"⁷ and careful solicitude. Such an attitude was especially desirable in Elizabethan times when the rapid transition from feudal society made it particularly difficult for the young to adjust themselves to its somewhat chaotic conditions.⁸ Shakespeare amplified from the *Bestrafte Brudermord* this close family solidarity; at her father's death,

¹ See L. L. Schücking, "Die Familie bei Shakespeare," *Eng. St.*, LXII, 192 ff.

² Sir T. Smith, *De Republica Anglorum* (London, 1583), pp. 10 ff.; and M. S. Rawson, *Bess of Hardwick* (New York, 1910), p. 101.

³ *Relation of the Island of England* (Camden Soc., London, 1897), p. 24.

⁴ William Gouge, *Domesticall Duties* (London, 1634), p. 459.

⁵ H. Peacham, *Compleat Gentleman* (London, 1622), p. 33. Cf. Schücking, *op. cit.*, pp. 191 ff.

⁶ Peacham, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

⁷ John Newnham, *Nightcrowe* (London, 1590), p. 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

Ophelia goes insane; and Laertes, to avenge him, kills the Prince and loses his own life. The brother and sister, therefore, being so closely united and acting on such similar motives, may properly be treated in a single study.

Only in five scenes has Ophelia a speaking part, and her lines are far from numerous; but her love affair with Hamlet has gained her much more extensive treatment than some of the larger roles. Hazlitt declared her "young, beautiful, artless, innocent and touching"; and most other nineteenth-century commentators are of the same opinion. Some, however, especially in recent times, have become more dubious both of her personal character and of her artistic presentation. Snider found her "weak"; Rümelin considered her indistinctly drawn; and Miss Latham combines the views that she has no "active virtues" and yet is a good character, though touched with worldliness.⁹ Pfeleiderer, like Snider, thinks her weak, because she so readily gave up Hamlet's love.¹⁰ Miss Landsberg finds her unimportant in the plot, and believes that Shakespeare took no great care in conceiving her artistically.¹¹ Jones calls her "trite," and her mad scene "theatric";¹² and Sir E. K. Chambers describes her as "a timid conventional girl, too fragile a reed for a man to lean upon";¹³ does Chambers suppose that Elizabethans, who termed woman the "weaker vessel," expected to "lean upon" their wives and daughters? Many of these comments, in fact, show surprisingly little sense of the social background of the age. Bradby attributes to her "less character than any other of Shakespeare's heroines."¹⁴ Nicoll calls her a "shadow," finds her "weak and lacking in will," and, on the basis of her song of St. Valentine's Day, even raises the old question of her chastity with Hamlet.¹⁵ In short, with the rise of modern feminism, both

⁹ Grace Latham, "O Arme Ophelia," *Sh. Jhb.*, XXII, 162-163.

¹⁰ W. Pfeleiderer, *Verhältnis zwischen Hamlet und Ophelia* (Berlin, 1908), pp. 75 ff.

¹¹ G. Landsberg, *Ophelia* (Breslau, 1918), pp. 90 ff.

¹² H. M. Jones, *The King in Hamlet*, U. of Texas Bull. (Austin, 1918 [1921]), p. 10.

¹³ E. K. Chambers, *Shakespeare* (New York, 1926), p. 187.

¹⁴ G. F. Bradby, *Short Studies* (London, 1925), pp. 155 and 158.

¹⁵ A. Nicoll, *Studies in Shakespeare* (London, 1931), pp. 28 and 54 ff.

Ophelia's high character and her artistic vividness have been impugned; and yet she is almost entirely Shakespeare's own creation; for, in the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, she hardly appears outside the mad scenes, and her madness, strange to say, is treated as comic relief. Would Shakespeare then have created the heroine of his greatest tragedy as "trite," "theatric," and indistinctly drawn? At any rate, this wide divergence of critical opinion demands a fuller study of her part in relation with her father, her brother, and especially her lover Hamlet, in the light of Elizabethan customs and ideals.

Shakespeare's Ophelia is clearly very young. In the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, she runs to Corambus for protection against Hamlet, and he refers to her as "my child." In the first quarto, she is perhaps a trifle more sophisticated: she tells Laertes that she has already "lent attentive eare" to his advice, and has no fear for her honor; but the King calls her a "pretty wretch," as Othello did Desdemona;¹⁶ and she is "fearefull" at Hamlet's transformation. In the later texts, she modestly listens to Laertes' advice about her love affair; and, though she archly suggests that he be equally circumspect, she is apparently too inexperienced to realize the political implications of a marriage with the Crown Prince. She is certainly more docile, especially to her father, than Shakespeare's older women, Beatrice,¹⁷ Olivia,¹⁸ and the merry wives of Windsor. She addresses Polonius as "my lord"; and, exasperated at her foolish innocence, he calls her a "green girl" and a "baby"; and, without protest, she bows before the storm. She is not used to dramatic performances, which were so common in the court-life of the age;¹⁹ and, as in the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, she is "affrighted" when Hamlet bursts in upon her half-undressed. Truly, as daughter of a prime minister—unless her father were indeed remiss in his paternal duties—she could hardly be depicted as so charming and yet unbetrothed, unless she

¹⁶ *Othello*, III, iii, 91. "Wretch," of course, was a term of endearment.

¹⁷ See Nadine Page, "Beatrice, 'My Lady Disdain,'" *M. L. N.*, L, 494 ff.

¹⁸ See the present writer, "The Wooing of Olivia," *Neophil.*, XXIII, 37 ff.

¹⁹ See R. Child, "The Play Scene in 'Hamlet,'" *J. E. G. Ph.*, XXXII, 44 ff.

were still in her early 'teens.²⁰ Her youth explains her dependence on her father and the life of semiseclusion that she apparently has led. Indeed, Elizabethan maids "should be seene, and not heard";²¹ and, in those turbulent times, a young girl might well be warned against danger if she "enters parley or admits of an inter-view with love." Her secluded life is clearly indicated when Polonius remarks, "I'll loose my daughter to him [Hamlet]," very much as the Venetian Brabantio cries out at the loss of Desdemona, "How got she out?"²² Polonius may well reiterate his boast of Ophelia's "duty and obedience": she promises to "obey," and does so, even declaring, with dubious veracity, that she has "longèd long" to return Hamlet his gifts; and she sees him, or refuses to see him, as Polonius directs. All this apparently impresses the other characters in the play as quite *comme il faut*, indeed, most favorably; and the Queen even considers her as a suitable wife for the son she loves so fondly. But this subservience of Ophelia to her father is due not only to contemporary custom but also to the deep affection that she bears him. In the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, the love of her "sweetheart" Hamlet unbalances her mind; but, in this respect, Shakespeare seems to have changed his source; and, in the first quarto and the later texts, she goes mad from grief at Polonius' death: she "speaks much of her father," and hardly refers to the abortive love affair with Hamlet. Indeed, she is still so young that her ties with her father are naturally stronger than those with her lover, and therefore it is not surprising that she gives Polonius such complete and ungrudging obedience.

Ophelia's relations with Laertes cannot be so clearly seen in a contemporary light; for the domestic conduct books of the period say little of the relationship between brother and sister.²³ In the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, the brother's bitter grief at his sister's insanity is not prepared for by any previous scene between them. In the first quarto, Shakespeare intro-

²⁰ L. C. Powell, *English Domestic Relations* (New York, 1917), pp. 13 ff.

²¹ R. Brathwait, *English Gentlewoman* (London, 1631), p. 41.

²² *Othello*, I, i, 170. Cf. I, iii, 196 ff.

²³ L. L. Schücking, *Die Familie im Puritanismus* (Berlin, 1929), p. 121.

duces such a scene, in which Ophelia even calls Laertes "thou"; and, in the later texts, although the two call each other "you" in ordinary talk, their conversation is drawn out at greater length, and their mutual affection emphasized. When the scene between them opens, Ophelia has apparently just told Laertes of her love affair with Hamlet; and, chary of the honor of his sister and of the family, he impresses on her the need of self-restraint. Affectionate but patronizing, he addresses her as "my dear sister." They promise to correspond as a matter of course; and they part with a mutual fondness that motivates Laertes' later grief and rage at her insanity and death. Indeed, her madness affects him almost as much as the slaughter of his family infuriates Macduff. She is "Dear maid, kind sister, sweet Ophelia"; and he calls her "thou," as Horatio does Hamlet after the Prince is dead. When he hears that she has drowned herself, he is too overcome to utter his "speech of fire," and bursts from the King's presence in unmanly tears. Indeed, the reality of their mutual affection is indubitable; and all the brother's influence, as well as the father's, impelled her to forego the love of Hamlet. Surely, an Elizabethan would not have thought a young girl "weak" because she followed the advice of her brother and the commands her father gave her. Her position, furthermore, as a loyal subject required that she create no dynastic complication for the reigning family; in fact, her loyalty to Hamlet himself as the Crown Prince, demanded, as every Elizabethan would understand, that she relinquish him as a suitor for her hand.

Ophelia has been studied almost entirely in connection with her love affair with Hamlet; and, probably because she has hardly been considered as a daughter or a sister or a subject, this love affair has generally been explained in a distorted and most un-Elizabethan way. To Ophelia, Hamlet was the ideal gentleman, well-born, charming, fashionable, the courtier, scholar, soldier—all that one could wish. Indeed, he is "unmatched," a very paragon Prince Charming. The love affair is of only recent origin; and Polonius and Laertes apparently have only recently heard of it. She believes her

Prince's "music-vows," is surprised and hurt that they may not be all they seem, insists that he has "importuned" her "with love in honourable fashion," and later naïvely tells him that he made her "believe" he loved her. That, in some sense, she returned this love seems evident, although in the mad scenes, she dwells rather on her father's death: she defends the love affair to Polonius; and, later in a soliloquy, she says that she "sucked the honey" of Hamlet's "music-vows." That Hamlet loved her seems equally clear: though with a strict propriety, he generally called her "you" even in the most intimate conversations, yet, in the deeper privacy of soliloquy, he lapsed to "thy," and thus revealed to the audience his tenderest feelings. Even after breaking with her, he could still play the gallant; and he bitterly declared that he "did love" her "once"; and finally, at her grave, in deep sincerity, he cried, "I lov'd Ophelia." Some critics, on the basis of the St. Valentine song in the mad scene, have suggested that before the play began she had already been his mistress: in that case, the well-informed Polonius should have known the fact and rated her soundly for it; she surely could not have been so innocent about the matter as she was to Laertes; and surely the Queen, who doted on Hamlet, would not have selected his mistress as a possible wife. Nothing of paramour and mistress, moreover, is apparent even in the most intimate scenes between Hamlet and Ophelia on the stage: with meticulous decorum, Ophelia addresses him as "my lord" and occasionally as "you," but never with the "thee" and "thou" of Antony and Cleopatra. To be sure, he talks bawdry to her at the play, but the Elizabethans were free in their language; and, even at that, she rebukes him, and will not listen; and his attack on face-painting, a common one in Shakespeare, is no serious slur against her character; for most Elizabethan ladies, following the Queen's example, used "Artificiall Complexion."²⁴ The related theory also, that Polonius clandestinely approved, or even brought about, this intimacy with Hamlet in order to place his daughter on the throne, has no positive support

²⁴ Brathwait, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

in the text; and, if he had any such plot in mind, why had he, as apparently he had done, supported the election of Claudius in Hamlet's absence; and why did he break off this love affair as soon as she told him of it?

This love affair with Hamlet then is to be taken at face value as "a violet in the youth of primy nature"; and one may inquire into the causes that made it "sweet, not lasting." Misunderstandings expressed in subtle dramatic ironies²⁵ separate the lovers; and, in both cases, their parents, though somewhat inadvertently, bring about these misunderstandings. The prudent commands of Polonius make Ophelia shut herself from Hamlet and return his gifts; and likewise the obligation for revenge that the Ghost laid upon Hamlet obliges him to give up his love affair with the daughter of the regicide's prime minister. Indeed, so utterly is he absorbed in his revenge that in his soliloquies he hardly alludes to Ophelia. Each of the lovers attributes this unexplained coldness of the other to falsity; and Ophelia seems to have good reason to take Hamlet's renunciation of his former declarations of love as proof that the worst fears of her father and brother were well founded. Hamlet, in turn, feels that she has jilted him. They tax each other with being "unkind," and not "honest." It is a veritable lovers' quarrel: each thing that he says to make her unhappier makes him unhappier himself; and, in final bitterness, calling her by the intimate "thee," he urges her to get her to a nunnery, perhaps because he would not have her marry someone else. If she should marry, he gives her for her dowry a "plague" of calumny. Ophelia is cut to the quick, and takes refuge in the thought that he is mad. Perhaps at this point, Hamlet glimpses Polonius spying on their talk; and he suddenly demands, "Where's your father?" Ophelia replies with a patent lie, "At home, my lord." Some critics blame her for this; but was not Hamlet mad? And was not she, as a good daughter and a loyal subject, bound to connive at any means that might show the cause of his insanity? Did

²⁵ Cf. the present writer, "Mistaken Identity in Shakespeare's Comedies," *R. A. A.*, April, 1934.

not, indeed, her love for Hamlet himself require that he be kept ignorant of her father's stratagem? Their quarrel is never made up; after the play, Hamlet is sent to England; and, when he returns, Ophelia has been drowned; but his fury at her grave expresses his feelings toward her.

The conventional nineteenth-century criticism of Ophelia comes nearer to the truth than recent judgments, which apparently would prefer to have her approximate Desdemona in her treatment of her father and Lady Macbeth in her attitude toward God's Anointed King. She is not the Prince's mistress, but an Elizabethan girl of high rank, *comme il faut*. She listened to the constituted authorities that God had placed above her, to her father, to her elder brother, to the King and Queen. If she is "weak," it is because she is young, dependent, and considerate of others. She does not turn against Hamlet;²⁶ she merely follows her father's orders, and relinquishes him as a supreme sacrifice to the greatness of his place; and her madness comes about, not because she listens to her father's advice, but because that father, whom she loved so dearly, came to a sudden and shocking end: Shakespeare has carefully changed the mad scenes from his sources so that her insanity might spring "all from her father's death." Juliet, Desdemona, and Imogen come to evil for disobeying their parents; Ophelia obeys; but her ruin does not come from her obedience. She is a Greek protagonist of her little drama: she has no tragic flaw of character, but falls through the impulsion of great forces over which she had no power; and, by a bitter irony, these forces were operated by her lover Hamlet, the ideal gentleman, the Prince, whose affection she renounced for his sake rather than her own.

If Ophelia has been much discussed by critics, Laertes has been almost equally ignored. In fact, since Hazlitt casually declared him "too hot and choleric" to be an attractive figure, down to 1930 when Miss Campbell enlarged on the background of these epithets in Elizabethan medicine and folklore,²⁷ his character seems to have escaped systematic efforts

²⁶ See Schücking, *Eng. St.*, LXII, 192-193.

²⁷ L. B. Campbell, *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes* (Cambridge, 1930), pp. 113 ff.

at interpretation. Such comment as there is shows wide diversity: Rümelin calls him a "fresh, brave, knightly figure";²⁸ whereas Adams considers him a "fop" like Osric;²⁹ and Sir E. K. Chambers finds him "a shallow, vigorous young noble, quick with a word and quick with a blow but of less than average temper in brain and ethics."³⁰ In the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, Laertes hardly appears except as the willing instrument of Claudius for killing the Crown Prince; and, probably because this shocking murder seemed inadequately motivated to an age that held royal lineage a sacred thing, Shakespeare developed Laertes early in the play to show his deep affection for his father and his sister. In the standard text, he appears in five scenes, and his part has been considerably developed, so that Shakespeare depicts his education, his family relations with Polonius and Ophelia and his relations political and personal, with Claudius and with Hamlet.

Laertes' education conforms to the conceptions of the time. The medieval usage of sending one's son to the court of one's overlord for proper training³¹ lingered among the high nobility in the custom of sending at least the eldest son to London: thus in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Valentine and Proteus go to the Emperor's court to perfect their "youth and nobleness of birth." So Laertes went to Paris to "ply his music"; and music was an important part of Renaissance, as of classical, education;³² and, until the rise of Puritanism, practically all people of standing could both play an instrument and join in the complicated part-singing of madrigals. What else Laertes learned beside the inevitable fencing, we are not sure. Ophelia twitted him about following "the primrose path of dalliance"; and, though Laertes was very certain of himself in this regard, Polonius, who knew him shrewdly, impressed upon him the wise choice of friends—one of the chief things

²⁸ *Hamlet*, Furness var. ed., II, 328.

²⁹ *Hamlet*, ed. J. Q. Adams (Boston, 1929), p. 187.

³⁰ E. K. Chambers, *Shakespeare*, p. 187.

³¹ Kelso, *op. cit.*, pp. 144 ff.; J. D. Wilson, *Life in Shakespeare's England* (Cambridge, 1920), pp. 68 ff.; *Cyville and Vncyville Life*, ed. Rox. Lib., 1868, urged the rural aristocracy to come yearly to court to improve their manners.

³² Kelso, *op. cit.*, p. 161; and Elyot, *Governour*, Bk. I, sec. vii.

at a university, according to Peacham³³—sent Reynaldo to inquire after his behavior, and apparently gave him his allowance piecemeal; but perhaps Polonius was merely taking wise precautions. Young English nobles on their travels notoriously wasted their time;³⁴ and Earle's description in his *Microcosmographie* of "A Young Gentleman of the University" is a vivid commentary on Reynaldo's mission:

[He] is one that comes there to wear a gown and to say thereafter, he has been at the university. His father sent him thither because he heard there was the best fencing and dancing schools; from these he has his education, from his tutor the oversight. The first element of his knowledge is to be shewn the colleges, and initiated in a tavern by the way, which hereafter he will learn of himself. The two marks of his seniority is the bare velvet of his gown, and his proficiency at tennis, where when he can once play a set, he is a fresh man no more. His study has commonly handsome shelves, his books neat silk strings, which he shows to his father's man [cf. Reynaldo], and is loth to untie or take down for fear of misplacing. Upon foul days for recreation, he retires thither and looks over the pretty book his tutor reads to him, which is commonly some sort of history [story], or a piece of Euphormio, for which his tutor gives him money to spend next day. His main loytering is at the library, where he studies arms and books of honour, and turns a gentleman critick in pedigrees. Of all things he endures not to be mistaken for a scholar, and hates a black suit though it be made of sattin. His companion is ordinarily some stale fellow, that has been notorious for an ingle for gold hatbands [apparently the roarer-parasite], whom he admires at first, afterwards scorns. [Cf. Prince Hal and Falstaff.] If he have spirit or wit he may light of better company, and may learn some flashes of wit, which may do him knight's service in the country hereafter.

Laertes had obviously studied "arms and books of honour"—very practical information for a courtier—for he is a master of punctilio; but whether his life at college was quite of the sort described and whether he indulges in all the "taints of liberty" that Polonius enumerates, one cannot tell; Polonius calls these accusations "forgeries"; but, even supposing that

³³ Peacham, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

³⁴ Kelso, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

they were true, these were, as Polonius says, but the "usual slips" of an Elizabethan youth enjoying his first freedom.

Shakespeare has drawn Laertes as not only dutiful but also deeply affectionate toward his father. The fourth commandment bound children to honor their parents;³⁵ King James admonished his son to revere his "Parents and Predecessors";³⁶ and Shakespeare expresses this relationship as normal in his plays.³⁷ This respect of son for parent shows itself in a certain formality as in Hamlet's leave-taking of his mother, even after he has bitterly reminded her of her shortcomings, and is likewise evident in Laertes' farewell to Polonius. Quite so did Lord Gilbert Talbot ask in his letters for his father's "daily blessing."³⁸ There is more than quaint convention in all this: beneath it is a true affection and tenderness. The best Elizabethan fathers by oversight³⁹ and example⁴⁰ gave training to their sons, as well as by mere precept: the mission of Reynaldo shows the oversight; and Polonius' own sagacious management of his affairs furnished a lively example of the successful minister and courtier. Laertes' reaction to all this is obvious in the later acts: he will stop at nothing to avenge his father's death; his father's friends are his friends; his father's enemies, his enemies; and the keen-witted Claudius gives him the subtlest compliment by saying: "Why, now you speak like a good child [son] and a true gentleman." Laertes' sense of family honor and his love for his father are such that he will stoop even to the treacherous murder of his Prince. If Polonius was a model father, he is repaid by a devoted son.

Rather less conventional are Laertes' relations with the King; and yet they run quite true to the conceptions of the Renaissance. In the first act, Laertes appears as a loyal subject

³⁵ Newnham, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

³⁶ King James, *Political Works*, ed. Mellwain, p. 21.

³⁷ See Schücking, *Eng. St.*, LXII, 197.

³⁸ Rawson, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

³⁹ R. S., *The Countryman and His Household* (London), pp. 2 ff.; *Hobson's Horseload of Letters* (ed. princ., 1613), contains one from a father to his son on the latter's studies at the University.

⁴⁰ Newnham, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

seeking permission to return to Paris to complete his education; when he reappears in the fourth, he leads a tumultuous "rabble," who cry out, "Laertes shall be king!" Fear of civil ferment made the Elizabethans "proclaim the iniquity of rebellion";⁴¹ Kings were God's "Lieutenants and Vice-gerents on earth";⁴² and treason was a "damned vice hated of God & man."⁴³ Thus when Laertes shouts, "To hell allegiance," he is voicing the most dreadful religious, as well as political, sentiments. The King meets this crisis with dignity and tact; he affectionately calls Laertes "thou," as he did in the first act, and later shifts to the "you" of equality; and Laertes, who started with "thou vile king," shortly changes it respectfully to "my lord." The proofs that finally convince Laertes are presented off the stage; but the crisis was a serious one; and the King later exclaims, "How much had I to do to calm his rage!" Laertes' conversion to Claudius' side was no easy thing for Shakespeare to make convincing: the King's proofs could not well be presented on the stage without a long scene with a number of new characters; and Shakespeare, to increase its probability, doubtless inserted the Laertes scenes early in the play to show the young man, not only deeply fond of his sister and father, but also faithful as a subject and suspicious of the Prince. Perhaps Laertes thought that Hamlet killed Polonius in order the more easily to seduce Ophelia; at all events, early in the play, he is clearly not the intimate friend of Hamlet. Moreover, Laertes appears to have no positive political program, and he himself seems to admit that he has "little" means even for accomplishing his revenge. Thus he is won over, and so completely won that he himself even proposes to "anoint" his sword with poison to make sure of Hamlet's death.

Laertes' relations with Hamlet follow in consequence of Claudius' contriving. The graveyard scene clearly suggests that the two had never been close friends, though later the

⁴¹ T. Floyd, *Picture of a Perfit Common-wealth* (London, 1600), p. 297. Cf. J. N. Figgis, *The Divine Right of Kings* (Cambridge, 1922), p. 88.

⁴² King James, *op. cit.*, p. 281.

⁴³ J. Bodenham, *Wits Common-wealth* (London, [?1649]), p. 379.

Prince declares that he had always "loved" Laertes. It increases the exasperation between them, and plays into the hands of Claudius so that Hamlet's efforts at conciliation before the fencing match bring from the still angry Laertes only the evasive reference of their quarrel to "some elder masters of known honour." But for all this, the purpose of Laertes' fiery mind is not steadfast to the end; and, when he realizes that he has killed his Prince in foul play, he turns from Claudius, says that his "conscience" troubles him, declares himself "justly killed" by his own "treachery," warns Hamlet that "the King's to blame," and asks forgiveness. In short, Laertes is too young and too "fiery" to have the reserve and poise that give fixity of purpose. His choleric disposition quickly transcends his "moderation and reason,"⁴⁴ and is easily diverted into evil courses, of which in turn he readily repents. This is the youth who so glibly had assured his sister of his restraint and self-command. Like Breton's "Young Man," he is "a colt that must have a bridle":⁴⁵ Polonius had been that guide and check; and, when the father is gone, the son is easily led from one extreme to another. Indeed, Laertes might well have taken to himself his warning to Ophelia: ". . . best safety lies in fear; Youth to itself rebels, though none else near." He had feared that her imprudent passion might stain the family honor or cause its political downfall; and his own headlong precipitation accomplished both these things before the play was done, and also dragged down the reigning dynasty and killed his sister's lover.

The passive Ophelia and the fiery Laertes form a happy contrast; and neither seems to belong to the prudent, self-conscious Polonius. Although the Renaissance considered heredity the origin of that virtue that sanctioned a nobility of birth⁴⁶—and James I believed this theory⁴⁷—though the "good example"⁴⁸ of fathers were supposed to breed like ex-

⁴⁴ Bodenham, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

⁴⁵ N. Breton, *The Good and the Bad* (London, 1616), "A Young Man." See also *Much Ado*, III, iii, 128-9.

⁴⁶ Castiglione, *Courtier*, ed. Rouse and Henderson, pp. 32 ff.

⁴⁷ James I, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

⁴⁸ Newnham, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

cellencies in sons because the latter were thought to "follow the steps of their parents,"⁴⁹ yet, despite the closeknit unity of Polonius' family, little resemblance appears between the three members of it that are shown us. Laertes, to be sure, shared with Polonius his love of moralizing wit; and perhaps Ophelia had something in common with her mother to whom Laertes so affectionately alludes; but the fundamental characters of the three could hardly be more different. Shakespeare, indeed, although he makes Hamlet refer to heredity as causing "some vicious mole of nature" in a man, rarely depicts any striking resemblance between sisters and brothers or even between parents and children: Henry IV and Henry V, though both are done in full-length portraits, have little in common. Rosalind and her father in *As You Like It* both exhibit an optimism that rises above calamity; but is not this due merely to the pastoral atmosphere of the play? Certainly the usurping Duke and his daughter Celia show no similarities. Desdemona apparently inherited little or nothing from Brabantio; and *Lear*, though it deals with fathers and children of two households, portrays virtues and vices in the parents that show little correspondence with the virtues and vices of the children: Cordelia, like Lear, is obstinate; and Edgar, like his father Gloucester, is true and loyal; but there the similarities seem to end. *Hamlet* merely suggests the great qualities that the Prince had in common with his father; and certainly neither of them felt that they resembled Claudius. The household of Polonius, so realistically portrayed, oddly enough, is not much better. Ophelia's negative docility would be impossible in the official position of Polonius; and father and son, likewise, are poles apart: the one has occasion to chide himself for too much prudence; the other shows the "flash and outbreak of a fiery mind." Shakespeare's ignoring of heredity may be due partly to his following old sources that ignored it; but, in *Timon*, he utterly transcended and

⁴⁹ J. Swetnam, *Araignment of Lewd Women* (London, 1615). Corin (*As You Like It*, III, ii, 31-32) thought intelligence hereditary. Kent, on the contrary, repudiated heredity in favor of astral influence (*King Lear*, IV, iii, 32 ff.). On this subject, see the present writer, "Bastardy in Shakespeare's Plays," *Sh. Jhb.*, 1938.

changed a popular conception to illustrate an economic theme;⁵⁰ and, had he thought of heredity likewise as an important social factor, he would have changed his sources similarly to express it. Perhaps the formality of an Elizabethan home kept parents and children so far apart that early influence, which is popularly included in heredity, was reduced to a minimum; but, in the family of Polonius, the distance between father and children was not great. Perhaps the current idea of heredity was purely a political conception to sanction the aristocracy of birth and the theory of Divine Right of Kings; but Shakespeare, in his later years especially, was so politically minded that one would expect him to show its influence in such a play, for instance, as *The Tempest*; but neither Miranda nor Ferdinand have many traits in common with their respective fathers. The inference that remains is that the dramatist was more interested in depicting his characters according to their years, their humors, and their social planes; for, in that age, these matters were considered more significant: the individual to survive had to sink himself in his career; girls must be reared for complete adaptability in marriage; and boys must grow utterly into the walk of life fixed for them by their birth: thus Ophelia is primarily a young girl, like other Elizabethan girls of her social class; Polonius is, above all, a minister of state; and Laertes is a youthful would-be courtier as yet unskilled in the technique of diplomacy.

Not heredity but environment, in the form of social status, dominates the plot of *Hamlet*; and the play is full of emotional repressions due to the rank of the characters: Gertrude makes a marriage of convenience to save the dynasty; Claudius forever plays a part, concealing even from his wife the crime that so deeply troubles him; Hamlet, to consummate his revenge, is led to repress not only his wonted gaiety but also his natural affection for his old friends, for Ophelia and for the mother who "lived almost by his looks." To the enforced restraint of all these characters, Laertes is in sharpest con-

⁵⁰ See the present writer, "The Theme of 'Timon of Athens,'" *M.L.R.*, XXIX, 20 ff.

trast; and his swift violence not only gets him no revenge, but destroys the dynasty that his father had given a lifetime, and indeed his life, to fortify. Laertes, moreover, is sharply differentiated from the scholar Horatio, from Osric with his affected airs and graces, from the merry Rosencrantz and from Guildenstern, the politician-in-embryo.

Both Laertes and Ophelia are studies in poignant irony: they both are true to type, and this very truth to type, as in *Iago*,⁵¹ brings on their ruin and the catastrophe of the tragedy. Like a good Elizabethan youth, Laertes is chary of the family honor: he warns his sister against Hamlet; and he rushes to avenge his father's death and obscure burial, and will not forgive Hamlet's insults at his sister's grave; and yet, in the very torrent of his revenge, he forfeits his own honor by stooping to treachery. His warning to Ophelia, moreover, wrecked a love affair that might otherwise have placed her on the throne, and helped instead to cause the madness for which he blamed the Prince. Family honor motivates his every major act; and his every act rashly miscarries, except his killing of the Crown Prince; and for this in the end he properly repents. Those who blame Hamlet for delaying surely should hold up Laertes as a model Elizabethan youth,⁵² but truly the maladroit follies into which his choleric nature led him show Hamlet's watchful prudence as a happy contrast. *Ophelia also is a study in ironies: she did just what she should have done, and thus destroyed her love affair, seemingly drove the Prince insane, lost her own mental balance, and died a suicide popularly despised. Her effort to help Hamlet by finding out the cause of his complaint served only to turn him more bitterly against her; and thus her very docility and affection bring ruin to herself and to those she loved. If *Hamlet* be a play of dynastic court intrigue, Ophelia and Laertes are innocent spectators who, in the onrush of events, are caught in the very vortex, and, trying to follow the *mores* of their social class and age, are whirled, like the figures in the storms of Dante's hell, with all the rest down to a common ruin.*

⁵¹ See the present writer, "Honest Iago," *PMLA*, XLVI, 724 ff.

⁵² See G. L. Kittredge, *Shakspeare* (Cambridge, 1924), p. 39.

CHAPTER V

YOUNG OSRIC

SEVERAL OF the important characters in *Hamlet*, Horatio and the gravediggers for instance, seem rather apart from the plot; and among these belongs Osric, who appears only in the final scene. Osric, nevertheless, like Horatio and the gravediggers, is highly individualized both by his own remarks and by those of Hamlet. The King sends him to invite the Prince to fence with Laertes; Hamlet ridicules his affectations of speech and manner; he is master of ceremonies in the fencing match that follows; and, as Hamlet dies, he announces the entrance of Fortinbras. Possibly he is a conscious accomplice of Claudius, as Professor Wilson thinks;¹ but at least we may be sure that Claudius told him as little as he could, for he was certainly less trustworthy than Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to whom Claudius had told practically nothing that was not common knowledge. A mere supernumerary could have done as much as Osric; and yet Shakespeare has given him a clear-cut personality. Perhaps because this personality is so clear-cut, the critics pass him over with little comment. Hunter objects to his introduction as a new character so late in the tragedy. Professor Jones thinks that Claudius chose him as bearer of Laertes' challenge so as to disarm any suspicion in Hamlet, and also suggests that his airs and graces are intended to represent the rise of the Danish capital to an international position as a result of the victories over the elder Fortinbras.² Professor Adams considers that Hamlet's play of wit with Osric, despite the Prince's pessimistic slur against the "drossy age," shows Hamlet conquering his former melancholy and so pre-

¹ J. Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet* (New York, 1935), p. 281; and A. H. J. Knight, *M.L.R.*, XXXI, 385 ff.

² H. M. Jones, *The King in Hamlet* (Austin, Texas, 1918 [1921]), pp. 35-36 and 56 n.

paring for action.³ No critic, however, in spite of Shakespeare's interest in the role, gives it more than incidental treatment.

Osric, indeed, is Shakespeare's own creation. In the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, Phantasio, the court fool has Osric's place: he is sent by the King to ask Hamlet to support the royal wager against Laertes, and he brings in the foils at the beginning of the bout. In actual Renaissance life, however, sword-play was a matter of much circumstance and etiquette, and a court-jester would hardly present a challenge or have charge of the weapons to be used. Thus realism required that a courtier take Phantasio's place; but dramaturgy still required that the character be comic to give relief just before the catastrophe: *ergo* Osric. His character, indeed, is not even based on that of Phantasio, though both are subject for laughter; for Phantasio is a professional fool, whereas Osric is a fool by the luxuriant efflorescence of his own inherent nature. His growth in verisimilitude as a courtier can be traced through the successive stages of the play. In the first quarto, the dramatist gave this part of Phantasio's role to "a Braggart Gentleman," whom Hamlet ridicules for his extravagant language and strong perfumery, and calls a "foole." Apparently, this "Gentleman" is not quite to the manner born; for "Hee knows not the Court," though, like Osric, he seems to act as umpire at the fencing match. The second quarto (1604), which probably reflects a revision of the play just after the accession of King James, considerably expands the part of Osric, and passes on this text to the later quartos; but the folio text (1623), which seems to represent a still later revision,⁴ omits over thirty lines of the Osric dialogue. Hamlet's statement that Osric is but one of "Many more of the same bevy that . . . the drossy age dotes on" suggests that he belonged to a recognized current type; and the expansion of his part in the quarto of 1604 further suggests that this type was to be found among the new courtiers who, at the accession of

³ J. Q. Adams (ed.), *Hamlet* (Boston, 1929), p. 322.

⁴ J. Dover Wilson is of the opinion that the folio represents Shakespeare's revision of the quarto text (*The Manuscript of Shakespeare's Hamlet*, New York, 1934, pp. 29, *passim*).

James I, flocked about that monarch; and perhaps the reduction of the lines in the folio should be taken to imply that this particular species of the genus "water-fly" found little favor in the royal eyes, and so was one of the ephemera and lasted but a day. Osric is obviously "young," though clearly older than a page: just where then does he belong in the pageantry of Renaissance court-life?

The ubiquitous law of primogeniture left to younger sons of good family only a starveling subsistence in the Church, which had been rather efficiently looted by Henry VIII, or a dubious living in the army, which even in time of war was irregularly paid, or a slippery place at court, where one might live by one's wits if one were lucky and the monarch liberal.⁵ In the higher ranks of society, as in the lower, unemployment was epidemic: London was full of university graduates who, having no ecclesiastical preferment, must fall to writing plays and broadsides or to even less reputable practices to get bread; and it was full of cast soldiers who owed their livelihood either, like Sir Toby Belch,⁶ to wealthy relatives, or, like Falstaff, to such shifts as came to hand. Pistol, for instance, had become a "roarer," a frequenter of taverns, a seducer of gilded youth into the bravado and chicanery of street-life.⁷ Ben Jonson in *Cynthia's Revels* differentiates from this lower type, personified in Anaides, a wealthier sort, "Hedon, the Voluptuous," and Amorphus, the affecter of foreign graces, presumably elder sons, who hope to found a career, if not on services rendered, at least on fine clothes, fine manners, and fine speeches.⁸ To this more affluent group belongs Osric, who has "much land and fertile" and is "spacious in the possession of dirt"; and his clothes, manners, and speeches suggest the contemporary portraits of a "Fantasticke" and a "Niniham-

⁵ See the present writer, "Orlando, the Younger Brother," *P. Q.*, XIII, 72; and "Sir John Falstaff," *R. E. S.*, VIII, 414 ff.

⁶ See the present author, "Sir Toby's 'Cakes and Ale,'" *Eng. Studies*, XX, 57 ff.

⁷ See D. C. Boughner, "Pistol and the Roaring Boys," *Shak. Assoc. Bull.*, XI, 226 ff.

⁸ See E. K. Chambers in *Shakespeare's England* (Oxford, 1917), I, 80-81; and D. C. Boughner, "Don Armado as a Gallant," *R. A.-A.*, XIII, 18 ff.

mer" as set forth by Riche.⁹ The King's using him as a messenger, moreover, and the part he plays in the fencing match, clearly show that he has the status of a courtier.

Indeed, Osric's verbiage and his dress proclaim him all-too-much the courtier. To give his talk an air of foreign elegance, he coins so many abstruse aureate terms that even the scholarly Horatio accuses him of speaking "another tongue," and remarks that one needs explanatory notes to understand him. Of course, he ignores Horatio as socially beneath him; but Hamlet, whom he cannot ignore, parodies his verbosity to the point of *reductio ad absurdum*; for, indeed, the Prince particularly detested affectation. Osric is abashed; soon "all's golden words are spent"; and he bows himself out. Apparently he delivers Hamlet's message to the King with such a "flourish" as to leave some uncertainty in the royal mind; for Claudius is obliged to send another messenger, a brief and forthright "lord" to discover when Hamlet will be ready for the bout. Though Osric's style of speech cannot strictly be described as euphuism—and euphuism belonged to an earlier day—yet Euphues himself could not have said less in a manner more grandiose. Like Overbury's "Courtier," Osric "puts more confidence in his words than meaning, and [one suspects] more in his pronunciation than his words."¹⁰ The Elizabethans had apparently come to resent such outlandish liberties with their speech; and even James I, who himself was not above pedantic affectations, urged his son in the *Basiliſon Doron* to set an example of "plaine and sensible . . . language."¹¹ Perhaps the courtiers discovered that verbal pyrotechnics were not pleasing to the royal ear, and, consequently, changed their style; and perhaps for this reason, Shakespeare cut down the part of Osric in the folio version of the play.

Osric's clothes must have characterized him vividly upon the stage. He holds in his hand a "bonnet," doubtless with

⁹ B. Rich[e], *My Ladies looking-glasse* (London, 1616), p. 51.

¹⁰ Overbury, *Characters* (ed. princ., 1614), "A Courtier." Burton (*Anatomy of Melancholy*, Part III, Sec. 2, Mem. 2, Subs. 4) associates such arts with designing women.

¹¹ James I, *Political Works*, ed. McIlwain (Cambridge, Mass., 1918), p. 47. See also his *Workes* (ed. 1616), p. 183; and his *Vranie*, ed. Arber, p. 35.

much parade, and, to Hamlet's disgust, will not return it to his head. The rest of his apparel, one may surmise from his gloating over the fine trappings of the rapiers and poignards that Laertes has wagered and that he describes as "very dear to fancy"; and Laertes himself, who apparently followed his father's advice and dressed in a very "costly" fashion, seemed to Osric a most superb gentleman because of this "great showing." All this is realistic; for, though Elizabeth and James I tried to restrain their courtiers' dress by sumptuary laws adapted to each rank, yet policy required that they surround themselves with a magnificent assemblage given to extravagant display,¹² even though the more startling habiliments of their courtiers brought about a disapproval that is reflected in Shakespeare's satirizing of Osric. Contemporary writers describe the fine gallant as "daub'd thicke with gold lace,"¹³ and as a "kind of walking Mercers shop";¹⁴ and Middleton, who was certainly no Puritan, censured those who would "strangle and choke more velvet in a deep-gathered hose than would serve to line my lord-what-call-ye-him's coach."¹⁵ "Their prodigal glisterings and their spangled damnations"¹⁶ aroused general scorn. Such were "effeminate fashions," particularly objectionable to King James I,¹⁷ and associated with the vices that young noblemen flaunted when they returned from the Italian tour; and Breton stigmatizes the user of such blandishments as "An Effeminate Fool."¹⁸ Earle's description of "An Affected Man" also strikes home to Osric: he is "an extraordinary man in ordinary things. One that would go a strain beyond himself and is taken in it. A man that overdoes all things with great solemnity of circumstance and . . . makes himself ridiculous." His every movement is "studied and premeditated." Perhaps the neatest summary of Osric's

¹² Cheyney, *England from the Defeat of the Armada* (London, 1914), I, 33; and W. Besant, *Tudor London* (London, 1904), p. 197.

¹³ See Massinger, *Maid of Honor*, ed. Bryne (London, 1927), p. 90.

¹⁴ Earle, *Microcosmographie*, "A Gallant."

¹⁵ Middleton, *The Black Book* (London, 1604), pp. 523-524.

¹⁶ *Muld Sack* (London, 1620).

¹⁷ James I, *Political Works*, ed. McIlwain, p. 46.

¹⁸ N. Breton, *The Good and the Bad* (London, 1616), "An Effeminate Fool."

type, however, is Overbury's character of "A courtier": "To all men's thinking [he] is a man, and to most the finest. . . . He smells; and putteth away much of his judgment about the situation of his clothes. . . . He puts more confidence in his words than meaning, and more in his pronunciation than in his words. . . . He follows nothing but inconstancy, and admires nothing but beauty, honours nothing but fortune, loves nothing . . . he moves by the upper spheres, and is the reflection of higher substances." To all this description of perfume, clothes, and verbiage, Osric runs true; and, indeed, he is the very "reflection of higher substances," for his Prince's merest whim governs his opinion even of the weather.

Shakespeare and his audience were unsympathetic toward Osric, not only because he was affected, but also because such affectations were associated with foreign countries and especially with Italy,¹⁹ which was supposed to be a sink of atheism, immorality, and deceit. Osric's clothes may well have been cut in "the Italian fashion," which for a while held vogue.²⁰ He certainly professed a vast admiration for the nice punctilio and "soft society" of the traveled Laertes; and his speech and manner somewhat suggest Overbury's description of "An Affectate Traveller," whose "discourse sounds big, but means nothing." Certainly Italian elegancies were in disrepute with the solid, sensible Englishmen of the day: the geographical insularity of England, the Reformation, which had cut all ties with Rome, the hatred of Machiavelli augmented by Huguenot propaganda, and the strange doings and ideas of the gilded youth who returned from the Grand Tour, all helped to fix this popular opinion. Ascham called Italy a "Circe's court";²¹ and Nashe's opinion was no better.²² As the Renaissance decayed in Southern Europe, this attitude grew common: Breton²³ and Brathwait²⁴ inveigh against

¹⁹ See Lucy Aikin, *Memoirs of the Court of Elizabeth* (London, 1869), pp. 432 ff.; and Sir W. Raleigh in *Shakespeare's England*, ed. cit., I, 30.

²⁰ L. F. Salzman, *England in Tudor Times* (New York, 1926), Plates V and XL.

²¹ R. Ascham, *Scholemaster*, ed. Arber, p. 75.

²² T. Nashe, *Works*, ed. McKerrow, II, 301.

²³ N. Breton, *Courtier and Countryman* (London, 1617).

²⁴ R. Brathwait, *English Gentleman* (London, 1641).

Italian manners; and Peacham declares that, though the English neglected the education of their children, the sending of a boy to Italy was "ten times worse."²⁵ Harrison,²⁶ Ben Jonson,²⁷ and Rowlands²⁸ looked upon Italianate affectations as stuff for satire; and such was apparently the current attitude.

Perhaps the best evidence that Osric's assumed refinements were of foreign origin is his interest in fencing; and the match between Hamlet and Laertes was doubtless given on the Elizabethan stage as an exhibition of actual skill, probably in the Italian type of fencing as taught by Saviolo and Di Grassi. Certainly it was intended to be presented with full realism; and just such an exchange of rapiers as occurs in the match is described in a French treatise by Saint-Didier in 1573 and in an Italian treatise by Di Grassi translated into English in 1594.²⁹ In that age, without police protection on the streets, skill in swordsmanship, or at least a reputation for it, was most necessary. Castiglione truly declared that gentlemen must excel in arms that they might defend their honor;³⁰ and the duello, as introduced into England in the 1590's, with all its pageantry of forms and niceties of etiquette, was certainly an Italian importation;³¹ and it probably was on the whole a civilizing influence, for clearly it was better than the indiscriminate brawling and the bitter family feuds that it more or less replaced. About 1600, at least three Italian masters of fencing were offering instruction in London;³² and, among the upper classes, the traditional sword and buckler were giving place to the lighter and more agile rapier; for the swift thrust had demonstrated its superiority over the cutting stroke that left the swordsman at the mercy of his adversary for the

²⁵ H. Peacham, *Complete Gentleman* (London, 1622), p. 34.

²⁶ W. Harrison, *Description of England* (London, 1587), Bk. II, chap. v.

²⁷ B. Jonson, *Cynthia's Revels*; see especially the character of Amorphus.

²⁸ Rowlands, *Humours Blood*, ed. Hunt Club, No. XIII.

²⁹ See *Times Lit. Supp.*, Oct.-Nov., 1919; and Jan.-Feb., 1934.

³⁰ Castiglione, *Courtier*, tr. Hoby, ed. Henderson, pp. 32 ff.

³¹ Kelso, *The English Gentleman of the Sixteenth Century* (Urbana, Ill., 1929), pp. 97-98, 101, and bibliography.

³² See Sieveking in *Shakespeare's England*, ed. cit., II, 290 ff. See also A. S. Wilson, "The Duello in Shakespeare," *Anglia*, to appear.

instant that his weapon was poised in air. Old-fashioned men-at-arms detested the change; and even as experienced a soldier as Sir Philip Sidney preferred the older weapon. Popular opinion classed fencing-masters with rogues and vagabonds; and in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, Pompey refers to "Master Starve-lackey," the professional fencer, as an *habitué* of Mistress Overdone's notorious establishment. No less unpopular was the duello itself, for all its convenience as a means of settling private feuds. Richard Jones in his dedication of *The Booke of Honor and Armes*, the chief Elizabethan manual of personal honor and private combat, even apologized for the subject on which he wrote. Bryskett considered duelling wicked, and urged men rather to "forgive offences," or go peacefully to law.³³ The less idealistic Bacon thought duelling folly, but admitted that in so turbulent an age one must defend one's honor in some such way, "or else there is no living or looking upon men's faces";³⁴ and in 1614, the Star Chamber issued a decree against duelling.³⁵ In *Loves Labours*, in *Merry Wives*, and in *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare makes fun of the practice; and, in the two former plays, the participants are foreigners. Osric then, as an expert fencer who measures the foils and apparently judges the match, was a timely subject for Shakespeare's ridicule of foreign affectations—a subject for satire, even though he is no more opposed to Hamlet than are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He manages the match fairly, and seems ignorant of the foul play intended: Shakespeare makes him ridiculous, not because of his part in the tragedy, but because in actual life he was looked on with disdain.

The question, however, still remains just what was Osric's social rank and place at court. He is not a mere professional fencing-master; for such an one would neither bear the King's message to Hamlet nor take the place of Polonius in announcing the entrance of Prince Fortinbras. Perhaps the clue to Osric's social status appears most clearly in Hamlet's line in

³³ L. Bryskett, *Discourse* (London, 1606), p. 66.

³⁴ F. Bacon, *Charge Touching Duels* (London, 1604), pp. 12-13.

³⁵ See *Cal. State Papers Dom.* (London, 1858), p. 224.

the first quarto text: "The Court knowes him, but he knows not the Court." It suggests that he is a courtier, and yet not quite to the manner born. The Tudors themselves were little more than upstarts; Henry VIII had founded a new nobility with the monastic lands; and Elizabeth's court was full of her father's new-made lords and ladies³⁶ and of adventurers like Sir Walter Raleigh, who sought to advance their fortunes by their wit and by lavish display. Although Smith was voicing a common sentiment when he declared that yeomen were "no gentlemen,"³⁷ yet the sons of yeomen, no better than Malvolio, acquired lands, conned books of politic manners, and sometimes even climbed to exalted places. Nashe is bitter against such "obscure vpstart gallants as without desert or service, are raised from the plough to be checkmate with Princes."³⁸ Merchants also, grown rich from usury,³⁹ acquired estates,⁴⁰ and founded county families. Stubbes deplored the efforts of the low born to achieve gentility;⁴¹ Churchyard declared the social order topsyturvy;⁴² Basse scorned the "mon-grill gentles of the townes," sprung from the shop and countinghouse;⁴³ Ben Jonson ironically describes the devious ways by which such became gentlemen;⁴⁴ and Earle draws a most unattractive picture of "An Upstart Country Knight."⁴⁵ Under James I, the old families continued to decline; and the impetunious King even capitalized this social revolution by founding the new rank of baronet so that he might sell a title that was minor and yet hereditary to the clamorous *nouveaux*

³⁶ See Salzman, *op. cit.*, pp. 6-7; and Ward, *C. H. E. L.*, V, 391.

³⁷ Sir T. Smith, *De Republica Angl.* (London, 1565), pp. 41 ff. See also the present writer, "Olivia's Household," *PMLA*, XLIX, 797 ff.; and Harrison, *op. cit.*, Bk. II, chap. v.

³⁸ Nashe, *Works*, ed. cit., I, 173.

³⁹ Lodge, *Chrestoleros*, ed. Spenser Soc., Nos. 44 and 47.

⁴⁰ Kelso, *op. cit.*, p. 45; Peacham, *op. cit.*, sig. D ff.; Markham, *Profession of Servingman*, Roxb. Lib. (London, 1868), p. 119; and R. H. Tawney, *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century* (London, 1912).

⁴¹ Stubbes, *Anatomie*, ed. New Shak. Soc. (1876), p. 29.

⁴² T. Churchyard, *The Mirror of Man* (London, 1594).

⁴³ Basse, *Sword and Buckler* (London, 1602), stanza 63.

⁴⁴ Jonson, *Every man Out of His Honour*, I, i.

⁴⁵ Earle, *op. cit.*, No. xviii. Cf. G. B. Harrison, "Essay" in Breton's *Melancholike Humours* (London, 1929), p. 54.

riches. Breton saw the old nobility becoming poor while country clowns and usurers grew rich;⁴⁶ and the average conservative Englishman undoubtedly agreed with him in lamenting such a change. All this affected the composition of the court: Queen Elizabeth surrounded herself with fifty gentleman pensioners, drawn chiefly from the nobility of Tudor creation, which she could trust, and with a guard of yeomanry arrayed in gorgeous livery and led by Raleigh.⁴⁷ James I also gave preferment to new families.

Surely Osric, with his airs and graces, seems *prima facie* to have much in common with this rising class; and the occurrence of the fullest development of his part in the second quarto text shortly after the accession of James I, who brought so many new faces to the court, may well be significant. Like a true *nouveau riche*, Osric overdoes his dress, his speech, and his manners; he is but a thing of yesterday, a "water-fly"; he "hath much land and fertile" and is "spacious in the possession of dirt"; and yet he is not one of the old nobility of assured social position, for "'tis a vice to know him." Finally, he is a "chough." The exact meaning of this word has puzzled scholars: it refers either to a noisy kind of bird of the crow family, or to a "chuff," i.e., a boor or rustic. Both characterizations suit Osric, and both are opprobrious. Elsewhere in Shakespeare, both words appear. Thus the case for one seems as good as for the other, and editorial opinion is divided. The *New English Dictionary*, however, remarks that *chuff* "In the seventeenth century [was] sometimes spelt chough by confusion with or play on, the name of the bird." Surely this use in *Hamlet* is a clear case of just such *double entendre*, that common type of Elizabethan wit in which one word is used in two simultaneous meanings; and an audience, knowing both words and seeing before them a boor turned chatterer, could hardly take it otherwise. The word "chough" then seems to imply that Osric's hereditary antecedents were more or less

⁴⁶ N. Breton, *Pasquils Mad-cappe* (London, 1626); and the present writer in *M.L.R.*, XXIX, 20 ff.

⁴⁷ Cheyney, *op. cit.*, I, 22 ff.

boorish; for the Elizabethans thought too much of family to call a member of the old nobility a "chuff."

Osric then is a courtier who puts his trust perforce less in noble ancestry than in extravagant display. He borrows from Italy what he cannot come by naturally at home, and hides his shortcomings under foreign finery: such persons were not popular; and he had need to be a fencer. He had also need to curry royal favor and protection, as his relations with the King and his talk with Hamlet on the weather seem to illustrate. In fact, he appears to be one of the "Filthie complement-mungers" pilloried by Nashe.⁴⁸ Flatterers were considered the greatest danger to the monarchy⁴⁹ and especially to youthful princes such as Hamlet;⁵⁰ and Hamlet's contempt for Osric shows that as a prince he was not subject to such wiles. The Elizabethans must indeed have hated Osric: they despised social upstarts, especially those that used flattery and outlandish affectations and who would not even fight you with a good old sword and buckler but stood on nice punctilio as set forth in Italian books, and used foreign weapons and a foreign swordmanship. Osric is a sharp contrast to the native country-bred Horatio, whom he does not deign to notice, to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who, whatever their limitations, were certainly born courtiers, and even to the traveled Laertes. Horatio has the poise and dignity of the truly educated; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and Laertes, if not really educated, have at least the advantages of good family and cultivated background. Osric apparently has none of these. Like a true tyro, he attempts an obvious, mannered social style that he cannot possibly maintain; he neither charms his Prince's ear nor gains for himself preferment or even respect: he is only a poor strutting zany, a parody of the gentility he cannot himself achieve. As such, he supplies a subacid comic relief to the last act of the tragedy, and so takes the place of Polonius, not only as gentleman-usher to royalty but also as the butt

⁴⁸ T. Nashe, *Works*, ed. cit., II, 301 and I, 361 ff.

⁴⁹ G. More, *Principles* (London, 1611), chap. xix. See also the present author, "Flattery, a Shakespearean Tragic Theme," *P.Q.*, XVII, 240 ff.

⁵⁰ L. Bryskett, *op. cit.*, pp. 106, 606.

of Hamlet's wit—but on how much lower a social plane than the old Chamberlain! To the general, he was a caviar too foreign to their taste to be a subject for anything but satire. Elsewhere in his plays, Shakespeare portrays the Elizabethan transition from medieval to modern society: Falstaff and Iago represent it in the army; Antonio and Shylock, in commerce; Beatrice and Olivia among noblewomen who sought for greater freedom; in *Twelfth Night*, he shows a noble household replacing medieval men-at-arms with a modern staff of servants; and, in *Osric*, he shows the feudal nobility of a medieval court turning into the fashionable society of modern times, a society derived largely from the life and manners of contemporary Italy. Indeed, *Osric* as another, though less sympathetic, study of Renaissance transition, must have been typical of "many more of the same bevy that . . . the drossy age dotes on."

Why Shakespeare so fully developed the part of so minor a character and gave him so sharply defined a personality in a play already long, can only be answered by conjecture. The text of *Osric*'s lines seems to be fullest about the time of the accession of James I to the English throne. James became at once King and patron of Shakespeare's company; and Shakespeare in *Macbeth*⁵¹ and *Lear*⁵² and perhaps in *Measure for Measure*⁵³ seems to have calculated his work rather carefully to the royal preferences in both form⁵⁴ and content. James, whatever was his actual taste as shown by the favorites whom he chose, at least in theory, disapproved the fopperies of "a Candie souldier or a vaine young courtier";⁵⁵ he especially urged his son to "eschew the effeminate in your cloathes" and also in language.⁵⁶ Perhaps, therefore, it is not too bold an

⁵¹ See the present author, "Macbeth as a Compliment to James I," *Eng. St.*, LXXII, 207 ff.

⁵² See the present author, "The Occasion of King Lear," *St. Phil.*, XXXIV, 176 ff.

⁵³ See the present author, "Political Themes in Shakespeare's Later Plays," *J. E. G. Ph.*, XXXV, 61 ff.

⁵⁴ See the present author, "King James and Shakespeare's Literary Style," *Archiv Neu. Sp.*, CLXXI, 36 ff.

⁵⁵ James I, *Political Works*, ed. cit., p. 45.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

inference to suppose that we owe the satirical sketch of Osric to such statements of James I, and that Shakespeare in revising the play about 1603, sought to amuse both his audience in general and his new lord and patron in particular by satirizing "a vaine young Courtier."

CHAPTER VI

THE DANISH MICROCOSM

SHAKESPEARE'S *Hamlet*, like Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, embraces, though in much narrower compass, the entire *comédie humaine* of contemporary society: the one is a social index of Medieval England; the other, of Elizabethan. As one would expect in Renaissance society, moreover, the courtly figures dominate the stage, just as the monarch and those about him dominated the social structure; but the play also includes, briefly but realistically sketched, exemplars of every other major walk of life: among the professional class, soldiers and clergy; the troupe of players, who were a sort of tradesmen purveying to the court; and even the peasantry, represented in the gravediggers. Their part in the plot is slight; and they are more lightly sketched and less individualized than Osric, perhaps because they are of lesser station; but no depiction of the entourage of Renaissance royalty could be true to life without them; and so utterly was the court both the center of power and the microcosm of society that Shakespeare, in developing his tragedy of court intrigue, fills the whole background with these realistic accessories, shown in their professional relation to the court and in their intellectual attitude toward court-life and current affairs of state.

At the beginning of the play Francisco, Bernardo, and Marcellus stand watch before the palace. An Elizabethan would probably think of these guardsmen in terms of the Queen's yeomen of the guard captained by Sir Walter Raleigh; and yet the dramatist seems to show a difference. Potentates of the Renaissance, fearful of rebellion among their subjects, usually employed foreigners, especially Swiss, to protect their persons; and, later in the play when Laertes and his mob break into the palace, Claudius calls for his "Switzers." Unless one suppose that the King had two separate sets of guards,

Marcellus and his companions then must be these "Switzers"; and, indeed, their very names suggest Southern Europe in contrast to the Danish Voltimand and Rosencrantz; and they are so ignorant of Danish politics and history, furthermore, that even Horatio, who is no courtier, can explain to them things that they do not know about the elder and the younger Fortinbras. Their being foreigners is evidently the reason why Hamlet does not turn to these soldiers, as he does in the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, to help him in his revenge; for, in the old play, they swear to him not only secrecy, as they do in Shakespeare, but also positive, presumably military, aid. Had they not been foreigners, they surely would have constituted Hamlet's most obvious allies: Marcellus is intimate enough with the Prince to know just where he is to be found "most conveniently" on the morning after the first scene; and the bodyguard of the King would be invaluable assistants in a palace-revolution. Unfortunately for the Prince, however, they are not only sworn to defend the life of Claudius; but, being foreigners, they would care little about the murder of the former king, and have no interest in a purely dynastic struggle; and, indeed, their loyalty is such that they apparently sacrifice their lives in defending the palace against Laertes' mob.

Their personal relationship and exact military status has been matter for some comment, and can perhaps be settled. The tragedy opens with the changing of the guard at midnight, the appropriate hour for the appearance of the Ghost. The cold is piercing. Francisco is on watch; Bernardo comes; they exchange sign and countersign; and Bernardo takes his place. The watch is strict, for war seems imminent. In the *Dramatis Personae* first devised by Rowe in 1709 and generally followed since, Bernardo and Marcellus are designated "Officers," and Francisco, a "soldier." Rowe makes this distinction presumably because Bernardo once addresses Francisco as "thee," and because Marcellus calls him an "honest soldier"; but the usual Elizabethan word for private was "centinel," from there being originally a hundred in a "band"; and so

"soldier" may well mean officer. The talk between Bernardo and Francisco, moreover, suggests the familiarity of equals rather than the social abyss between the commissioned officer and the enlisted man; and, furthermore, Bernardo has relieved Francisco upon the watch, and so should presumably be of equal rank. At all events, Francisco disappears at line eighteen never to return throughout the play. To settle their uncertainty about the apparition, Bernardo and Marcellus have brought Horatio to address it. Professor Jones takes Marcellus for "a young recruit"¹ because of his apparent ignorance of Danish history; but, in that case, one wonders how an inexperienced recruit, even lower than a private, could be so well acquainted, not only with Francisco and Bernardo but also with Horatio and even with the Prince. Surely, moreover, even the humblest native-born recruit would probably know more about the glorious victories and treaties of the late King's reign than would a foreign mercenary, who served for hire now this country and now that.

Horatio and Hamlet so dominate the second apparition-scene that Bernardo drops almost completely out; and Marcellus makes only the briefest comment; but it is he who first protests against Hamlet's following the Ghost; and he joins with Horatio in running after the Prince to see that no ill befalls. Marcellus does not presume to ask questions of Hamlet, as Horatio does; he merely swears secrecy; and he keeps his oath; for, had he not done so, Claudius would soon have had the key to Hamlet's mystery. Indeed, both Bernardo and Marcellus appear as "honest" soldiers—conscientious in their duties and loyal to their Prince, as long as that loyalty did not oppose the higher loyalty that they had sworn to the reigning King. They form a sort of introductory chorus to this drama of a "warlike state"; and they fade out into the background as the main protagonists come on the scene. In the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, Hamlet had contemplated a military revolution, and so began by winning the guardsmen to

¹ H. M. Jones, *The King in Hamlet* (Austin, Texas, 1918 [1921]), pp. 11-12.

his side; but Shakespeare prefers to change the technique of the conspiracy from mere force to diplomacy.

Indeed, the depiction of a warlike nation, lately embarked on a career of conquest, must naturally involve much of the military; and the most active soldier in the entire tragedy is, quite appropriately, "young Fortinbras," who does not appear in the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, and so, as Shakespeare's own addition to the story, must have a part of some significance. Just what this significance may be, however, former critics have done little or nothing to explain. Though at the beginning of the play, he is a "delicate and tender prince" of capabilities as yet unproved, he early embarks upon a rebellion to regain his father's lands lost to the elder Hamlet. This enterprise, he turns perforce into a "conquest" in Poland; and, in the course of that campaign, he so demeans himself that Hamlet votes for him as future King of Denmark; and, at the end of the tragedy, he at once assumes the sway. Shakespeare never lets us forget him: he is an insistently recurring figure throughout the drama; his doings impinge upon our attention in the first, second, fourth, and fifth acts: first in the talk of Horatio, then of the King; then he appears in person on his way to Poland; and finally, at the catastrophe, he dominates the stage. His part is a rising climax; he is the Nemesis of the House of Denmark; and his rising star is the symbol of its fall. He is no mere "adventurer," as Professor Jones would have us think, trespassing on Danish soil without the King's permission:² he is a Renaissance knight-errant; and his career is an object of admiration.

His character, like that of King Henry V, approximates the Elizabethan ideal of martial prowess. He apparently inherited the "pride" and quixotism of his father; and he is "truly great" in that, as Hamlet says, the principles of martial honor are the mainspring of his motives. Hamlet is almost envious of this simple, straightforward solution of Fortinbras' life-problem: Fortinbras can express himself in immediate and all-absorbing action; whereas the Prince of Denmark must

² *Ibid.*, p. 21.

intrigue and bide his time. Fortinbras is also a contrast to Laertes, who acts too impulsively, and fails. Of course, his role exists in part so that he can take over the kingdom at the end of the tragedy and pronounce the epilogue; he is in part, moreover, a symbol of the dangers of war and rebellion through which Claudius and Polonius must steer the Danish state; but he exists, perhaps most of all, as a foil to Laertes and especially to Hamlet, a living exemplar of the Prince's own military ideal of life.

Another soldier, one of the captains of the army of Fortinbras, plays something of a choral part in the middle of Act IV, comparable to the use of the guardsmen at the beginning of the play. To pay his *devoirs* to King Claudius, through whose territory he is passing, Fortinbras sends this captain to the Danish court; and Hamlet, on the way to his boat for England, stops the messenger for a moment's talk. The Captain tells him that the Polish war is being fought, not for the land involved, which is practically worthless, but purely for the honor of Norway, which cannot permit the affront of loss of territory. Professor Jones considers this captain a foreign mercenary because "old Norway" had given Fortinbras three thousand crowns a year; but so small a sum must have been mere personal allowance, and would not even feed an army. The soldiers of Fortinbras, moreover, we are told, were "shark'd up," i.e., levied, in the frontier provinces of Norway to serve for mere board and keep; and Claudius, furthermore, who seems to have been well informed, remarks that "all" of the army was made up of subjects of the King of Norway. Thus it would appear that the Captain is not a mercenary, but a patriotic Norwegian; and Jones' theory that his speech is contemptuous irony does not seem tenable. Surely, Hamlet's enthusiastic reaction to it does not suggest that he at any rate interpreted it as sardonic. Shakespeare, indeed, regularly views war in terms of national honor and not of economic gain. Like Marcellus and Bernardo, the Captain appears as an expression of the soldierly attribute of scrupulous loyalty, the same motive that actuates Hamlet in his revenge;

but the Captain, like his master, Fortinbras, is fortunate in that he can externalize his virtuous impulses in immediate action, whereas Hamlet has been obliged to wait and to restrain his similar emotions. The scene exists chiefly to supply a prologue and an occasion to Hamlet's following soliloquy on true greatness. The Prince, by inclination a soldier like his father whom he so much admired, cannot but envy this simple way of life in which high motives can express themselves at once in manly action. Thus in a sense, Bernardo, Marcellus, Fortinbras, and his Captain all symbolize Hamlet's own natural feelings and desires, and supply a telling contrast to the Fabian policy that he is obliged to follow.

Also associated with the court, but more specifically in the character of diplomats, are Cornelius and Voltimand, whom Claudius, early in the play, sends to acquaint the vassal "king" of Norway of Fortinbras' intended insurrection. Claudius calls Cornelius "good," and sends the two, each as a check upon the other, with powers limited by definite instructions, to demand that old Norway suppress his nephew's incipient revolt. Voltimand expresses their dutiful acceptance of the mission; and they start at once. When they return, Voltimand is again the speaker. He summarizes the results of the embassy with business-like concision, and after accepting the King's thanks, retires at once. This little interlude not only introduces us to Fortinbras, who is to appear at the conclusion of the tragedy, but also suggests the loyalty of the court to Claudius and the efficiency of the diplomatic service of Polonius: the rebellion is discovered and suppressed in record time, without expense or bloodshed; and it is even diverted to an attack on Denmark's former adversary, Poland. We see a realistic court in working order as the appropriate background for a political tragedy.

Perhaps because of the Reformation, the clergy in Shakespeare's plays, except in so far as his sources led him otherwise in *Romeo and Juliet* and the chronicle histories, occupy distinctly subordinate places. In *Hamlet*, the "Priest" at Ophelia's grave seems hardly an attractive figure; and yet,

like the soldiers already mentioned, he is merely following the proper dictates of his vocation. The second quarto refers to him as a "Doctor," a variation that Professor Dover Wilson considers significant as changing him from a Catholic ecclesiastic to a Protestant "Doctor of Divinity";³ but, as the Church of England still retained the title "priest" to designate that sacred office, and as both Protestant and Catholic universities granted the degree of "Doctor," this variation of terminology between the quarto and the folio does not seem to signify any such theological change. The present writer, moreover, would rather suggest, from the nature of the Priest's comments at the burial, that he is a Doctor of Canon Law; and, as Professor Elton has shown, the play as a whole seems to reflect a pre-Reformation, Catholic Denmark.⁴

In either case, whatever his doctorate degree, he unquestionably had sound reason for his objections. To be sure, in two scenes before her death, Ophelia appears insane upon the stage, but not a dangerous maniac. Shortly after, the Queen rushes in to announce that she is dead. The unfortunate girl had climbed out on a willow branch over a stream. The limb had broken. Her clothes, quilted with "bombast," the woollen wadding of the period, supported her for a few minutes as, floating upon the water, she sang snatches of songs, quite heedless of her danger. Soon, however, her sodden garments "Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay To muddy death." At this recital, her brother Laertes is overwhelmed with grief; and the King, who requires his political support, is fearful of the effect of this untoward accident. Ophelia, in short, seems to have killed herself; and, if she was conscious of this particular act, Common Law would have pronounced her guilty of suicide, or *felo de se*, as it was called, a serious crime involving both civil and ecclesiastical punishments. In civil law, it entailed forfeiture of all one's possessions to the Crown; it was originally taken as a type of homicide, and was

³ J. Dover Wilson, *The Manuscript of Shakespeare's Hamlet* (New York, 1934), I, 37.

⁴ O. Elton, *A Sheaf of Papers* (London, 1922), pp. 18-19.

still so regarded in the reign of Elizabeth.⁵ In canon law, it involved a sort of *post mortem* excommunication, the loss of Christian rites, of bell and requiem, and burial in consecrated ground.

The coroner's court had jurisdiction over the civil aspects of the case. The coroner, whose office antedates the Magna Carta by at least a century, was a person of importance in medieval times, as a financial check upon the sheriff.⁶ Thus the coroners came to hold inquests over suicides because their goods were forfeit to the Crown. The position, however, was ill-paid, and abuses flourished despite efforts at reform;⁷ and, by the reign of Elizabeth, its duties had shrunk to mere holding of inquests. Elizabethan courts were notoriously corrupt⁸ and subject to royal influence;⁹ for most of the judges held office at the royal pleasure. Thus Elizabethans would easily understand, if not actually take for granted, that a mere coroner's inquest would be most attentive to the desires of the King. In order to placate Laertes, Claudius must have Ophelia acquitted and given Christian burial. Laertes was already furious at the secret and unceremonious interment of his father; and the omission of funeral rites for his sister would certainly alienate him.

Unquestionably this intervention of the King, mentioned in the play as the "great command,"¹⁰ was necessary to secure Ophelia's acquittal. Perhaps because life among the lower

⁵ See *Hales v. Petit*, Plowden, I, 253 (1563). The case is a trespass which involved the ownership of land in question, which in turn involved a former forfeiture through *felo de se* of the plaintiff's husband. The serjeant for defense argued the *felo de se* "in a degree of murder," i.e. as murder in the first degree. Underhill (*Shakespeare's England*, Oxford, 1917, I, 381) thinks that in the inquest on Ophelia, Shakespeare glances at this case; but it had taken place forty years before and was generally forgotten.

⁶ Holdsworth, *History of English Law* (Boston, 1922), I, 82 ff.

⁷ See statutes of 28 Edw. III, c. 6 (1354); 34 Edw. III, c. 4 and 8 (1360); 38 Edw. III, c. 12 (1363); 1 Hen. VIII, c. 7 (1509); and 2-3 Phil. and Mar., c. 10 (1555).

⁸ See the present author, "Robert Shallow, Esq., J. P.," *Neup. Mitt.*, XXXVIII, 257 ff.

⁹ Holdsworth, *History of English Law* (Boston, 1922), IV, 79; and Percy, *Privy Council under the Tudors* (Oxford, 1907).

¹⁰ *Hamlet*, V, i, 222. See also Coke, *Institutes* (London, 1809), III, 54.

classes was too miserable to be attractive, the law looked upon *felo de se* as "an heinous offense"; for, as the public "have a right to every man's assistance, he who voluntarily kills himself is with respect to the public as criminal as one who kills another"; and the punishment prescribed was "as severe . . . as the nature of the case will admit of, namely, an ignominious burial in the highway with a stake driven through the body; and a forfeiture of all the offender's goods and chattels to the king."¹¹ The crime was defined as "where a man of age of discretion, and *compos mentis*, voluntarily kills himself by stabbing, poison, or any other way."¹² The heirs of Ophelia, if she had property, might have defended her and claimed their inheritance on the basis of her insanity; but this defense was too liable to abuse to be readily admitted; and, according to Hale, "not every melancholy or hypochondriacal distemper" makes a man *non compos*, but only "an alienation of the mind" such as renders the subject "frantic."¹³ Ophelia, as she appeared upon the stage and as the Queen describes her at her death, is hardly "frantic," and so could hardly be defended on this score; and, furthermore, according to Common Law, she might be insane at other times and yet be legally responsible in this particular case. The other usual defense, common in all cases of homicide, was that she died *per infortunium*, i.e., by accident, or so-called "chance-medley."¹⁴ The prosecution for the Crown, however, might respond that she had deliberately placed herself in danger above the stream, as the gravedigger remarked, and so was a sort of accomplice before the fact of her own death. In the present trial, however, the prosecution was doubtless intentionally weak, and one or both of these excuses was obviously allowed. The gravedigger apparently knew little of either the politics or the pleading that decided the case, since he says that she was acquitted because she was a "gentlewoman." At all events, the "great command," according to Shakespeare, seems to have domi-

¹¹ East, *Pleas of the Crown* (London, 1803), I, 219.

¹² Hale, *Pleas of the Crown* (Dublin, 1778), I, 411 ff.

¹³ *Ibid.*, I, 414.

¹⁴ M. Bacon, *New Abridgment* (Philadelphia, 1811), V, 116.

nated the coroner's inquest,¹⁵ as it was wont to do—usually on the side of severity to gain as many forfeitures as possible for the Crown, but this time, on the side of mercy.

The case, however, came not only under civil, but also under canon, law. Ordinarily, the clergy would accept the coroner's verdict, or the local vicar or rector would pass judgment and grant or withhold the final rites; but the case of Ophelia, as the gravediggers suggest, had become a *cause célèbre*. Her father had been a great noble and prime minister, and she had been almost betrothed to the Crown Prince. Public opinion was aroused, and the clergy must either vindicate canon law or stultify themselves. Certainly the Rev. Fr. S. A. Blackmore, S. J., is hardly justified in saying that Shakespeare portrays the Church as weak and powerless.¹⁶ The conflict between King and clergy must have been rather keen. The clergyman who officiates at the scant and "maimèd rites" of her burial service refers to an "order"; he says he has gone as far as his "warranty" will allow; and he does not hesitate to tell even Laertes that her death was "doubtful." The importance of the case and the "order" that he mentions clearly imply that the matter had been referred to the diocesan or to the metropolitan chancellor, or to some ecclesiastical court; for the speaker—commentators to the contrary notwithstanding—is clearly not judging the case merely upon his own authority. He roundly declares that, had it not been for royal intercession, "She should in ground unsanctified have lodged Till the last trumpet," and, instead of Christian prayers, "Shards, flints and pebbles should be thrown on her." In short, the conflict had resulted in a compromise: the clergy, fearful lest they "profane the service of the dead," had refused to say or sing a requiem; but they had permitted the tolling of the funeral bell, the procession to the grave and the "maiden strewments." They had been rather liberal; but still Laertes was furious, and outrageously insults the officiant by declaring him marked for hell.

¹⁵ Apparently the King had been able to manipulate the earlier inquest on Polonius so as to hush up the cause of his death.

¹⁶ Blackmore, *The Riddle of Hamlet* (Boston, 1917), p. 46.

Most critics, with supreme docility, have followed Laertes in his denunciation of the priest; but, indeed, like some of Chaucer's inimitable figures, this churchman merely acts true to the ethics of his profession. Those who object to his attitude quite fail to realize the point of view of medieval and Reformation Christianity. Significantly enough, even Hamlet, with all his declarations of devotion, makes no objection to the "maimèd rites."

The gravediggers represent the life and point of view of the lower classes; on whose account all this pageantry of the court must be maintained; for, if they were not sensibly impressed through their eyes and ears with regal greatness, not to say divinity, they would not accept a government as genuine. Their grumbling and cynicism seem to be the normal expression of a social group who knew only the seamy side of life; and it can hardly be attributed—as some critics do attribute it¹⁷—to the decadence of Denmark at the time: indeed, in contrast to the Scotland of *Macbeth*, the play offers no evidence of national decline at the accession of Claudius. The gravediggers supply the comic relief just before the catastrophe that Elizabethan tragedy required: one of them has, like Dogberry,¹⁸ a ludicrous half-knowledge of the law: he confuses *felo de se* with ordinary homicide, in which the defendant may gain acquittal by pleading self-defense, i.e., *se defendendo*;¹⁹ and, having started from this strange premise, he proceeds to chop legal logic with much throwing about of misused terminology. The Elizabethans, who knew the Common Law so well that on occasion they pleaded their cases without lawyers, must greatly have enjoyed such pseudo-legal patter; and this same general knowledge of the law, moreover, gives verisimilitude to these legal phrases in the mouth of an unlettered clown. The gravediggers, indeed, supply just the sort of grim humor, joking on suicide, death and bodily decay, that has delighted the Anglo-Saxon genius since the time of *Beowulf*, and that would be most appropriate

¹⁷ E.g., Horn, in *Hamlet*, Furness var. ed., II, 283; and Jones, *op. cit.*, pp. 37-38.

¹⁸ See the present author, "Dogberry's Due Process of Law," to appear.

¹⁹ M. Bacon, *op. cit.*, V, 116-117.

to so fierce a tragedy as *Hamlet*. Their talk suggests the immediacy of death to the common man in that age of early and swift mortality; and the conditions of the burial ground corresponds to the descriptions²⁰ and to the pictures²¹ of seventeenth-century broadside elegies: it is simply another touch of realism. The gravediggers take the place of *Phantasma*, the court fool in the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, who indulges in unseemly gaiety with the mad Ophelia. But their wit, for all its crudity, is in better taste; and, furthermore, like the introduction of Fortinbras' Captain, it has a point in giving Hamlet an opportunity to vent his feelings and show the audience his mental attitude. As representatives of a social group, these "clowns" are quite distinct from the other minor characters: the guardsmen are the very sinews and supports of government; the actors supply it with entertainment; the clergy accommodate themselves, at least in some fashion, to its demands; but the gravediggers speak out in blunt criticism, and roundly declare that justice is not done and that Ophelia, if she had not been a "gentlewoman," would have been "buried out o' Christian burial."

Shakespeare's depiction of the players is generally admitted to be not only realistic in conception but even immediate and timely in its reference to the contemporary vogue of the child-actors. In the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, the company clearly came from Wittenberg; and likewise in Shakespeare, Hamlet speaks to them as foreigners who come to "beard" him "in Denmark." He addresses them graciously as "masters," and welcomes them as "good friends" as if he had been a recent *habitué* of their theater. He jokes with them, and asks for a speech at once. The actor-manager declaims the story of Priam's death and the sack of Troy; and, though Polonius thinks the speech too long and the acting perhaps too realistic, Hamlet is delighted, urges the Chamberlain to give the players the best accommodations, and praises them

²⁰ See the present writer, *The Funeral Elegy and the Rise of English Romanticism* (New York, 1929), chap. iv, etc.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48; and the present writer, *A Century of Broadside Elegies* (London, 1928), *passim*.

as popularizers of history. Polonius dryly answers that he will "use them according to their desert"; but Hamlet, realizing that this promise is something equivocal, cleverly suggests that he should rather treat them in accordance with his own "honour and dignity." The presentation of *The Murder of Gonzago* apparently takes place as Hamlet wished; and the players, having fulfilled their function of supplying the Prince with objective proof, drop out of the tragedy. What Hamlet, who was "poor" even in thanks, gave them for their playing, one rather wonders. In the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, according to the Chamberlain, who naturally would have charge of such matters, they might hope only for a "poor reward, for their acting has sore displeased the King." Only one of the actors ever speaks *personâ propriâ*, and he for less than a dozen syllables, whereas his prototype in the *Bestrafte Brudermord* has ten times the speaking part; and yet, in Shakespeare, one understands the entire situation, and gets an effect of perfect realism, so economical is his art.

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare supplies not only heroic full-length portraits; but also, like Dante, he individualizes even his slightest creations with a word or gesture, though it be at the risk of delaying the precipitate action of the plot; and, just as Dante unifies his work by a recurring ethical standard, so Shakespeare depicts all his characters in relation to the predominant social institution of the age, the court: Osric, like Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Laertes, is himself a courtier; Marcellus, Francisco, and Bernardo are guardsmen of the King; the Priest at Ophelia's burial is perhaps a court-chaplain, trying to steer a narrow course between his duties to his God and to his King; the actors are, for the nonce at least, court players; and the gravediggers not only are plying their trade for a lady of the court, but also are expressing, as did the medieval *fabliaux*, the rather cynical attitude of the lower classes toward their privileged betters. Thus Shakespeare depicts a microcosm of all society in relation to the state, the predominating social institution of the age, very much as Chaucer presents medieval society embarked upon a pilgrim-

age, and so in its relation to the Church, the social institution that dominated his age. Chaucer talks about the trades and vocations of his men and women, and shows their thoughts and actions as determined economically by their respective businesses; Dante talks, or allows his ghosts to talk, about their aspirations and their sins on earth; Shakespeare shows his characters, even the supernumeraries, in the widest possible social relationships, and in the act of doing and thinking the very deeds and thoughts proper to the occasion and to their social rank. His is an art both broader and more concrete, the art of drama, of very action and of life itself; and, since it is so concrete, in order to be seriously convincing, it must reflect with minute fidelity the least details of current society and of current points of view. This realism of Shakespeare's art especially appears in a comparison of the minor roles with their prototypes in the *Bestrafte Brudermord*. Fortinbras and his Captain, the ambassadors Cornelius and Voltimand, and the Priest at Ophelia's grave, seem to have been added largely to fulfill the requirements of realism. Francisco, Bernardo, and Marcellus appear in the *Bestrafte Brudermord* merely as Francisco and "two soldiers," and are hardly individualized. The clowns at Ophelia's grave seem to take the place of the pre-Shakespearean Jens, who merely symbolizes the lower classes without truly and vividly expressing them. Only the actor, Carl, in the original approximates Shakespeare's realism. Thus the dramatist has vivified his play of Renaissance court intrigue with the rich background of all Renaissance social life, depicted with a graphic realism that was possible only to one who had rubbed shoulders with the peasantry, had had personal dealings with the professional classes, and had enjoyed *entrée* to the sacred precincts of the court.

CHAPTER VII

THE ELDER HAMLET AND THE GHOST

KING HAMLET, the father of the Prince, like Shakespeare's Henry V,¹ seems to embody the chivalrous and soldiery ideal of royalty that the Renaissance inherited from the Middle Ages. In the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, he is "majestic"; and his Ghost, though it is crudely drawn and boxes the ear of a poor sentinel, is a "noble shade." From these slight hints, Shakespeare has developed a truly royal figure. In the first quarto, he is a "gallant king"; and, even more fully in the standard text, his magnanimity appears. He has great "natural gifts"; he may be compared even to a "radiant angel"; in stature, he is likened to Hercules; and he overcame the Elder Fortinbras in single fight. His very murderer admits that at his death the "whole kingdom" was "contracted in one brow of woe"; his Queen was "Like Niobe, all tears"; and Hamlet so loved and admired him as to be inconsolable. His private virtues, furthermore, appear in the tender "dignity" of his love for Gertrude. King Hamlet, however, as the Elizabethans would expect, appears chiefly as a king: he had "An eye like Mars, to threaten and command"; he was valiant, and on "this side of the known world" was famous for his prowess. He seems to have fought with the Poles, if we may trust some emenders of the text;² he certainly reduced England to tribute and Norway to vassalage. Such warlike royalty should fitly show itself, even as a Ghost, "armèd at point exactly Cap-a-pe," bearing a "truncheon" and moving "majestical" with "martial stalk." His gestures and manners, furthermore, are "courteous," as befit a king. Professor Jones compares him to Hotspur and to Charles XII of Sweden, and believes that his victories, like theirs, were sterile and brought economic ruin to his people:

¹ See J. W. Cunliffe, "Henry V as Prince and King," *Columbia University Shakespeare Studies* (New York, 1916).

² Cf. S. A. Tannenbaum, *P. Q.*, XV, 307 ff.

he is, indeed, a martial and chivalric king; but his reign is certainly not depicted in terms of national ruin: the economic interpretation of history would hardly have been comprehensible to Shakespeare's audience; and criticism is not justified in reading into a play elements that the text does not clearly state or imply. Neither the courtly characters nor the grave-diggers suggest an exhausted country; and Shakespeare in his chronicle history plays and in *Timon*,³ like a true conservative Elizabethan, seems distinctly to approve the ideals of feudalism. To the playwright and his audience, the Elder Hamlet is a hero-king, one who protects his people and broadens his dominions.

Although King Hamlet himself is dead before the play begins, yet his Ghost, which appears in three crucial scenes, is the symbol and expression of the thrilling episode—the murder and the incest—that constitutes the antecedent action, and by commanding Hamlet to revenge, it furnishes the motive for the entire plot. Shakespeare himself is said to have played this part; and, whenever present, the Ghost unquestionably dominates the stage. But critics, generally seeing in *Hamlet* only a one-man tragedy, have until recently given the Ghost no more than casual mention; and, until very recently, it has not been studied as an essentially Elizabethan concept of demonology and folklore. Professor Greg has tried to explain it in modern terms as a mere "hallucination" due to Hamlet's distracted nerves:⁴ if so, a similar case of nerves must have produced an identical effect on Bernardo, Marcellus, and even the skeptical Horatio, all of whom clearly take the Ghost as the "sensible and true avouch" of their own eyes; and Horatio in particular accepts it as "something more than fantasy." Mr. Bradby gives up the Ghost as one of Shakespeare's failures: he finds it inconsistently conceived; for, in Act I, it appears for all to see, and in Act III to Hamlet's eyes alone;⁵ but Miss

³ See the present writer, "The Theme of 'Timon of Athens,'" *M. L. R.*, XXIX, 20 ff.

⁴ W. W. Greg, "Hamlet's Hallucination," *M. L. R.*, XII, 401 ff. Cf. J. D. Wilson, *M. L. R.*, XIII, 129, and E. E. Stoll, *Shakespeare Studies* (New York, 1927), pp. 187 ff. and 236 ff.

⁵ G. F. Bradby, *Short Studies in Shakespeare* (London, 1925), pp. 161 ff.

Campbell shows that this runs quite true to Elizabethan ghostly form; for such spirits, as their purposes required, might appear to one or more than one in any gathering.⁶ To understand the play, a study of the Ghost is necessary, in relation to ghostly lore and in relation to the characters and plot.

In Elizabethan times, a few physicians, and some skeptics like Horatio, took Ghosts to be the result either of deliberate fraud or of mental illusion due perhaps to superfluity of black bile in the system. The general run of persons, however, who would compose the audience in a theater, believed in the reality of supernatural beings, and was very much afraid of them. Most of the characters in the play itself reflect this common attitude; and Horatio, who has some doubts about this apparition in particular, if not about ghosts in general, is obliged to eat his words. Indeed, the Ghost is so real that Marcellus even proposes to strike at it with his "partisan." The terror that it inspires is also undeniable: it is a "dreaded sight"; the very soldiers, whose stock-in-trade was bravery, were "distill'd Almost to jelly with the act of fear"; and even Horatio, for all his previous doubts, must "tremble and look pale." If the Elizabethans had thought ghosts the mere hallucinations of their minds, they would not have been so much afraid of them. Dealings with spirits, even the merest speech, required circumspection; and, in the first scene, Horatio, as a "scholar," has been brought to question the Ghost in proper form.

Indeed, the Ghost in *Hamlet* runs true to type, and answers "all the tests" for an earthly visitant or at least a spirit of some sort;⁷ and, because it was unquestionably a spirit, it would at once raise a doubt in Elizabethan minds as to what class of spirit it might be. Medieval learned opinion and Renaissance folklore, which largely derived from it, allowed for the dreadful probability that any seeming ghost, even the most beneficent in aspect, might, like the witches in *Macbeth*,⁸ be a demon, that assumed this shape to tempt the beholder to do

⁶ Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes* (Cambridge, 1930), pp. 85 ff.

⁷ Campbell, *op. cit.*, pp. 85 ff. and 121 ff.

⁸ W. C. Curry, "The Demonic Metaphysics of 'Macbeth,'" *S. P.*, XXX, 395, 419 ff.

some deed that would damn his soul. Reginald Scot, the Elizabethan demonologist, plainly states this matter of ghostly disguise, and tries to show how true ghosts may be known from false:

All the souls in heaven may come down and appear to us when they list. . . . They say that you may know the good souls from the bad very easily. For a damned hath a very heavy and sour look; but a saint's soul hath a cheerful and a merry countenance: these are also white and shining, the other coal black. And these damned souls also come up out of hell at their pleasure. . . . They affirm that damned souls walk oftenest: next unto them the souls of purgatory.⁹

Nashe, furthermore, declares that the devil assumes the shape of a dead parent, the better to tempt his victim.¹⁰ Indeed, Protestant theology, having no purgatory from which ghosts might escape, was inclined to condemn all ghosts as devils; and no less a person than King James I attributed all such manifestations to evil spirits who "assumed a deade bodie, whereinto they lodge themselves,"¹¹ and used this guise as a means to tempt the living. Surely a view supported by the royal *imprimatur* would have numerous supporters among the audience before whom the "King's Men" played.

Thus the question as to identity was the natural primary reaction of an Elizabethan toward a ghost. Even Macbeth, in addressing Banquo's spirit, though he had good reason to believe it quite authentic, nevertheless suggests that it may be a devil in disguise, when he cries out, "Take any shape but that"; and even the Roman Brutus, on seeing Caesar's ghost, questions it at once:

Ha! who comes here? . . .
Art thou some god, some angel, or some devil,
That makest my blood cold and my hair to stare?
Speak to me what thou art?

In Greene's *Friar Bacon*, likewise, when the "Hostess of Henley" is conjured to appear, Miles mistakes her for a "she-

⁹ R. Scot, *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (London, 1584).

¹⁰ T. Nashe, *Terrors of Night* (1594), in *Works*, ed. McKerrow, III, 224.

¹¹ James I, *Daemonologie* (Edinburgh, 1597), pp. 33, 59, etc. See also Miss Campbell, *M. P.*, XXVIII, 294 ff.

devil"; and the apparition of Hercules is described as "the fiend appearing like great Hercules." In Marlowe's *Faustus*, the Emperor, on seeing the spirit in the shape of Alexander, exclaims over its identity. In Chapman's *Bussy*, the spirit Behemoth explains who he is at the beginning of his speech; and, in the *Spanish Tragedy*, the spirit of Andrea, at the very start, declares himself a bona fide ghost, and tells his name; but, even so, half the play is consumed before the hero is convinced of the truth of its message. The doubts of medieval lore, intensified by Protestant demonology, made the question of identity the first and basic one concerning any apparition. The existence of such a doubt in Hamlet's mind was discussed in the *Quarterly* as early as 1847 and is not entirely without followers today;¹² but most critics give short shrift to the theory: Bradby merely states that Hamlet never doubted the Ghost's word;¹³ Nicoll thinks Hamlet's uncertainty about the Ghost "manufactured" *ad hoc*;¹⁴ Waldock, in similar vein, remarks that it appears in one of his soliloquies, quite unprepared for "out of a clear sky."¹⁵ Would Shakespeare, then, who allows for such a question in *Julius Caesar* and in *Macbeth*, have depicted the even more important Ghost of Hamlet's father without taking into account the doubts and preconceptions of his audience? Surely, one should carefully examine the earlier scenes to determine whether or not this question of identity appears, and if so, how much it is emphasized.

In the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, the question of identity is apparent in Act I. Though Horatio recognizes the face and form, he is uncertain of the Ghost; and Hamlet hopes that it is not his father, "for the souls of the pious rest quietly till the time of their resurrection." He carefully checks up on its time of coming and on its appearance to decide whether it really is a Ghost; and, when told that it came at midnight, he

¹² E.g., I. T. Richards, "The Meaning of Hamlet's Soliloquy," *PMLA*, XLVIII, 741 ff.; and J. Dover Wilson, in *Hamlet* (Cambridge, 1934), notes *passim*.

¹³ Bradby, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

¹⁴ A. Nicoll, *Studies in Shakespeare* (London, 1931), p. 67.

¹⁵ A. J. A. Waldock, *Hamlet* (Cambridge, 1931), p. 47.

seems convinced, and addresses the spirit as "my royal father." The *Bestrafte Brudermord*, however, does not use this initial doubt as a motive for Hamlet's delaying his revenge: the Prince is quickly and easily convinced; and he delays killing the King, not because of any question of his guilt, but because royalty was "surrounded all the time by so many people"; and he puts on the play, not to test the word of the Ghost, but to surprise Claudius into betraying himself in public and so admitting his crime. Thus in Shakespeare's source, Hamlet's doubt of the identity of the Ghost and of the truth of its message is purely incidental; and, if Shakespeare meant it to be otherwise in the play, he should have given it emphasis and made its significance particularly clear.

In Shakespeare, in fact, this doubt does have far greater emphasis; it lasts longer in Hamlet's mind; and it is more significantly used. It certainly does not appear "out of a clear sky" late in the second act; and it assails not only Hamlet but all the others who experience the apparition. Marcellus mentions the Ghost, not as a king or even as a person, but as a "thing," a "sight," an "apparition"; Bernardo wants to be assured of its identity; so does Marcellus; and Bernardo calls it, "this portentous figure . . . so like the king," a phrasing that clearly implies that he doubted whether it *was* the King. At first, Horatio takes it as mere "fantasy"; but he is soon convinced of its spiritual essence, though probably not of its identity. The apparition comes; and three of the six lines of the dialogue that immediately precede his speech with it raise this same question as to who or what it was:

Bern. In the same figure, like the king that's dead.

Mar. Thou art a scholar; speak to it, Horatio.

Bern. Looks it not like the king? mark it, Horatio.

Hor. Most like; it harrows me with fear and wonder.

Bern. It would be spoke to.

Mar. Question it, Horatio.

Hor. What art thou, that usurp'st this time of night,

Together with the fair and warlike form

In which the majesty of buried Denmark

Did sometimes march?

If the Ghost were unquestionably the spirit of the King, why reiterate, and ask confirmation of, the apparent similarity? And why should this matter of identity be the first question on Horatio's lips? The word "usurp'st," moreover, certainly implies that he thought the apparition had no right to such a face and figure; and perhaps it was this implication that so "offended" the Ghost that it disappeared. After two or three horror-struck interjections, the watchers raise again the question of identity; this time, it is Marcellus: "Is it not like the king?" And Horatio answers: "As thou art to thyself." Horatio admits the similarity; but similarity is not proof; and, in the talk that follows, he refers to "Our last king, Whose image even now appear'd to us"; and Bernardo speaks of it as "this portentous figure . . . so like the king." The use of "image" and "like" certainly does not imply unquestionable identity. Horatio's address to the Ghost upon its second coming, however, suggests a greater belief in its being what it seems; and then, a moment later, his calling it a "guilty thing" seems to make it an infernal demon rather than his great liege lord, the "goodly king" whose funeral he had hurried home to honor. Indeed, no less than fifteen times during this first scene, before Hamlet has appeared at all, the question is raised as to the Ghost's identity, and generally with doubts cast on its being what it seems. Was Shakespeare such a stupid playwright that he gave reiterated emphasis to these doubts without dramatic purpose? Throughout this scene, moreover, the apparition is always "it," and is never apparently thought of with royal attributes or titles; and Horatio addresses it as "thou" like the Witches in *Macbeth*, not with the courtly "you" or with the honorific third person of a king.

In the second scene, when Horatio breaks the news to Hamlet, he expresses the same uncertainty, and says, "I think I saw him [the late King] yesternight"; he calls the Ghost "A figure like your father"; and, in describing the strange episode, he makes his climax: "I knew your father; These hands are not more like." The subsequent questions that Hamlet asks seem to be an effort to determine not only whether it

looked like his father but also whether it seemed to belong to the order of ghosts or of devils; and, when Hamlet determines to watch that night, his very language shows the doubt that apparently without prompting has come into his mind:

If it assume my noble father's person,
I'll speak to it though hell itself should gape
And bid me hold my peace.

The reference to "hell itself" implies the putative origin of the "it" which might "assume" the King's appearance: indeed, when no less of an authority than King James himself declared that the devil sometimes appeared in human shape to lure a man to mortal sin, such doubts as these must have seemed just and normal. In this uncertain state, Hamlet leans now one way, now the other; sometimes, his language implies belief that this really is his "father's spirit in arms"; and sometimes it does not. Horatio once refers to the apparition as "he"; but otherwise, they all use "it." Perhaps Horatio is partially convinced, but surely not the others; and Professor Nicoll's theory that Hamlet derived his doubts of the Ghost from his fellow-student, does not seem probable.

In the fourth scene, Horatio starts with "his," and then turns to "it" when the Ghost suspiciously lures Hamlet to a distance for their talk, and Marcellus suggests the possible danger to the Prince; but Hamlet, apparently following the authority of the *Daemonologie* of James I, declares that it cannot hurt his soul. The Prince is very dubious at first. On seeing the apparition, he cries out for heavenly aid as if it were a devil, and addresses it in an alternative apostrophe:

Angels and ministers of grace defend us!—
Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn'd,
Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
Thou comest in such a questionable shape
That I will speak to thee. . . .

If Hamlet were certain that this was indeed his father, why invoke heaven's aid? Why, in the four lines following,

four times bring up this question of identity? Even Horatio still calls the Ghost "it," and fears that it may "assume some other horrible form," and drive the Prince insane. When at last the apparition unfolds itself, it momentarily convinces Hamlet by declaring: "I am thy father's spirit," and explains, according to the orthodox opinion of the Church of England, that it is being purged of its sins in the Place of Departed Spirits, and so is "Doom'd for a certain time to walk the night." The revelation of the Ghost is overwhelming; and yet, even as the apparition disappears, the Prince cries out:

O all you host of heaven! O earth! what else?
And shall I couple hell?

But he is still under the spell; and, to the doubt implied in the last question, he exclaims, "O fie!" and tells Horatio, "It is an honest ghost." But what proof had he beyond the Ghost's own word? When the dread experience wore off, how could he still be certain? The fact, moreover, that the spirit burrowed underground like a "mole" suggested that it was a devil.¹⁶ In the second scene of Act II, Hamlet feels himself "Prompted" to his revenge by "heaven and hell"; and then follows his summary of Elizabethan science and folklore on the subject, a summary that was really needless for his audience, for the other world was very close to them:

The spirit that I have seen
May be the devil; and the devil hath power
To assume a pleasing shape; yea and perhaps
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
As he is very potent with such spirits,
Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds
More relative than this. The play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.

Professor Bradley discounts this passage as expressing no genuine doubt of Hamlet's because, he says, the play has not "the slightest trace [of such a doubt] before!"¹⁷

¹⁶ R. Scot, *Discourse upon Devils*, chap. iii. See also L. Lavater, *Of Ghosts*, ed. Wilson and Yardley (Oxford, 1929).

¹⁷ A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Criticism* (New York, 1926), pp. 72 ff. (ed. princ., 1904).

This question of the identity of the Ghost and, consequently, of the truth of its message, would, to an Elizabethan, be entirely adequate as a motive for Hamlet's delay in his revenge, and would give ample reason for the play-within-the-play as supplying necessary auxiliary proof. To kill a king—even the most atrocious tyrant—was not only a civil crime but a dread mortal sin: according to the widely accepted theory of Divine Right, kings were God's Anointed, his chosen "Lieutenants and Vice-gerents on earth";¹⁸ regicide was a "damned vice hated of God and man"¹⁹ and a "most detestable parricide."²⁰ Even Macbeth calls the killing of Duncan "Treason," and refers to "The deep damnation of his taking off." According to the accepted theory of the Anglican clergy, kings were the intermediary between human society and God. Thus Hamlet might well pause and weigh his evidence before he hastened to his revenge. Even after the play has convinced him of Claudius' guilt, he still feels that he must justify the intended regicide to Horatio as "perfect conscience." Indeed, according to the theory of Divine Right, the killing of even the worst usurper could hardly be sanctioned; and Claudius, though a murderer, was no usurper. James I, again and again, in his political pamphlets and his speeches, emphasized the theory of Divine Right as the very foundation of his claim to the English throne; a play given by the "King's Men" before his court, though it might condone the revenge of Iago on his general, could not possibly take lightly Hamlet's contemplated killing of Claudius.

The question of returning ghosts is kept constantly before the audience, not only in the early scenes but throughout the first half of the play: Hamlet touches on it in the great soliloquy, when he describes death as

The undiscover'd country from whose bourn
No traveller returns. . . .

And later when he asks Horatio to "Observe" his uncle, he declares that, if Claudius show no guilt, "It is a damned

¹⁸ James I, *Political Works*, ed. cit., pp. 281 ff. See also p. xvii.

¹⁹ J. Bodenheim, *Wits Common-wealth* (London, ?1640), p. 379.

²⁰ James I, *Political Works*, ed. cit., p. 169.

ghost that we have seen” The play is played; the King hurries from the stage; Hamlet is convinced by actual proof at last, and cries aloud: “I’ll take the Ghost’s word for a thousand pound.” Why should he say this if the object of the play had not been to test the spirit’s credibility? The first half of the tragedy dominated by doubts of demonology, is over. Hamlet no longer has a reasonable doubt; and, when he mistakes Polonius for the King in hiding behind the arras, he kills the eavesdropper without pause or question.

When Hamlet next sees the Ghost, in Gertrude’s closet, his manner is quite different. He speaks of the spirit as “he” rather than as “it”; he addresses it in the third person as a king—“your gracious figure”—or in the second plural, as an Elizabethan son to his parent, and not with “thou” as a human being to a spirit. He calls himself “your tardy son,” and refers to the Ghost as “My father in his habit as he lived.” Like a courtier before royalty, he excuses himself for having neglected “The important acting of your dread command”; and here the “dread” seems to refer more to the awe and majesty of a king than to the terror of a ghost. Hamlet could not explain to the Ghost that he had not acted sooner because he had disbelieved him. These differences of etiquette, such as titles of address and uses of the pronoun, meant much to the Elizabethans; and Hamlet’s entire manner has become somewhat like that of Laertes speaking to Polonius.

The armoured ghost is a fit depiction of Hamlet, the war-like King; and, indeed, he is the actual ghost of the departed, despite the doubts of contemporary demonologists, reflected in Bernardo, Marcellus, Horatio, and most notably in Hamlet, who above all preferred to think of his father as resting peacefully in heaven. This doubt explains the tardiness of his revenge; it leads to the play-within-the-play; and, immediately thereafter, he surely is not tardy in killing the listener behind the arras. The identity of the Ghost is, without question the major problem of the early acts, and is always kept before us until the presentation of the play has given it solution: would Shakespeare have added, by sheer accident, to his sources the

constant iteration of this theme? If the characters took the Ghost for Hamlet's father, why did they not call it "he" and "you," as Hamlet does in Act III, after he is convinced, instead of "it" and "thou"? Why do they constantly declare that it is "like" the King? Could any Elizabethan audience, saturated with the pseudo-science and folklore of the age, have seen the Ghost and heard these questions raised without grasping their significance? Apparently, in the plays of his middle period, Shakespeare reflects, not only the current social, economic, and political transition from the medieval scheme of things, but also the concomitant transition in popular thought and beliefs: thus, in *Hamlet*, the old Catholic conception of ghosts as the spirits of the departed, good or bad, is shown in conflict with the more purely Protestant conception of them as devils in disguise; and here, as elsewhere, Shakespeare is conservative—or shall we say Anglican rather than Puritan?—in making the Ghost a characteristic figure of Elizabethan folklore, an actual and worthy embodiment of the great and martial King, and a primary motive in the action of the play. Though short, its role is indispensable, with opportunities for the grandiose, the terrible and the pathetic; the message it gives Hamlet, even before he fully credits it, starts all the characters unwittingly on their way down to the catastrophe; and it is the basis for the ironic misunderstandings in which they are more and more inextricably entangled. Indeed, it motivates both Hamlet's action, and his long delay, and so makes possible the tragedy.

CHAPTER VIII

QUEEN GERTRUDE

ALTHOUGH *Hamlet* has been discussed at least twice as much as any other play of Shakespeare's, Queen Gertrude has hardly attracted the attention of scholars—even less, indeed, than Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who both together have fewer lines than she. The neoclassical critics barely mention her;¹ and the Romantic, even the garrulous Mrs. Jameson, quite neglect her. In 1848, Strachey called her "weak"; and Snyder in 1873, and more recently, Miss Mackenzie,² Sir E. K. Chambers,³ and Miss Campbell,⁴ briefly echo this opinion. Mr. Waldock, though he demolishes the psychoanalytic interpretation of Mr. Jones, does not attempt to do her justice;⁵ and Professor Nicoll declares her "little more than a puppet."⁶ Weak or strong, however, Gertrude has an important role: she has a speaking part in ten of the twenty scenes; her conversation with Hamlet in her private "closet" is one of the supreme and crucial passages in the play; the love that she inspired in Claudius was apparently the prime motive behind the antecedent action; she plays a striking part in the later scenes with Ophelia and Laertes; and her drinking of the poison precipitates the final catastrophe. Sometimes, like Hamlet, she assumes the function of a chorus, reiterating the note of tragic pathos. As a queen in her own right, moreover, she would properly be a subject of special interest to the Elizabethans; and, in her relations also as a wife and as a mother, she is too important to be neglected in a great tragedy that bristles with difficulties and debated questions.

hardly attracted

¹ J. Plumptre, *Observations on Hamlet* (London, 1796). Cf. *Monthly Rev.*, N.S., XX, 101.

² A. M. Mackenzie, *The Women of Shakespeare's Plays* (London, 1924), pp. 183, 187, 200.

³ E. K. Chambers, *Shakespeare, a Survey* (New York, 1926), p. 187.

⁴ L. B. Campbell, *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes* (Cambridge, 1930), p. 146.

⁵ A. J. A. Waldock, *Hamlet* (Cambridge, 1931), chap. v.

⁶ A. Nicoll, *Studies in Shakespeare* (London, 1931), p. 28.

Can Gertrude, indeed, have been so "weak"? This interpretation apparently is based on the vague accusations of the Ghost and on Hamlet's bitter, but also vague, reproaches, and especially on his "Frailty, thy name is woman," early in the play; but have these reproaches any clear substantiation outside the feelings of the speakers; and can Hamlet's famous epigram—an Elizabethan truism based on the Biblical concept of the "weaker vessel" rather than on contemporary fact⁷—be applied too seriously to Gertrude? The criticism that calls Gertrude "weak" depends on the charges of Hamlet and the Ghost; but do her own actions and her impression on the other characters—which would constitute far more telling evidence upon the stage—bear out this interpretation? Was it a "weak" and flaccid Gertrude that so fascinated the Elder Hamlet that he made her loss the climax of the recital of his woes: "Of life, of crown, of queen, at once dispatch'd"—an arrangement of phrases that Shakespeare deliberately changed from the *Bestrafte Brüdermord* and from the quarto of 1603?⁸ The Ghost would not have his son even "taint" his mind against this woman, of whom he still speaks more in sorrow than in anger. Was it the love of a "weak" Gertrude that impelled Claudius to fratricide—nay worse, to regicide—to obtain her hand? Like the Elder Hamlet, he also makes her the climax of his desires: "My crown, my own ambition, and my queen"—a line that does not appear either in the *Bestrafte Brüdermord* or in the first quarto, and so would seem to be Shakespeare's deliberate paralleling of the Elder Hamlet's climactic line already quoted. Claudius treats Gertrude with unfailing consideration, respect and love; for her sake, he tries to conciliate Hamlet, though at some personal risk, and even courts discovery of his last desperate plot to warn her against the poisoned goblet. Hamlet's most poignant bitterness in the closet-scene seems to arise from his very affec-

⁷ See L. C. Powell, *English Domestic Relations, 1487-1653* (New York, 1917), chap. v; and the present writer, "Desdemona: A Compound of Two Cultures," *R. L. C.*, XIII, 337 ff.

⁸ In the first quarto (1603), the line reads, "Of Crowne, of Queene, of life, of dignitie."

tion for her; and, even in the midst of his reproaches, he seems to characterize her as "a queen, fair, sober, wise," and declares that her marriage to Claudius could not have arisen from mere lust. The Elizabethan feminine ideal, of course, exalted the passive virtues; and so the heroines of the age seem strangely inert to modern eyes. Gertrude is only acting with due propriety when she leaves the business of state to Claudius, and interferes only in family matters, especially in the relations between her second husband and her son. She comes and goes as she is bid; and her death by poison is the consequence of her one refusal to listen to her husband. Her usual passivity should not be interpreted as weakness; for, in the crucial scene with the infuriated Laertes, she seems, quite intentionally, with a quiet courage, to draw the first brunt of his anger to herself; and it is she, moreover, who breaks to him the dangerous news of Ophelia's death. Like Claudius, she honestly admits her misdeeds to herself; and, in proportion to her sin, is even more self-reproachful. During the course of the play, neither moral weakness nor perversity are apparent in her character: let us then proceed to examine the series of crimes that compose the antecedent action, discover her part in these and so determine her culpability. Critics on occasion have accused her of murder, of adultery, of usurpation, and of incest.

Strachey seems to have been the first to point out Gertrude's innocence of the murder of the Elder Hamlet. The Ghost does not accuse her of it. It is never mentioned in her private conversations with Claudius, as Macbeth and Lady Macbeth discuss the murder of Duncan. Certainly the "poor little wife" in the *Bestrafte Brudermord* knew nothing. From the somewhat ambiguous statements of the Ghost, Hamlet for a time may have suspected her complicity, and the play-within-the-play, which he revised to fit the occasion, though it does not make her present at the murder, contains the line, "None wed the second but who kill'd the first"; but the real Gertrude in the audience apparently gave no sign of remorse or horror; Hamlet had not his proof; and he let the actors

continue. At the beginning of the closet-scene, he referred to "kill a king"; but Gertrude's obvious surprise upon this second test, apparently convinced him that she was innocent; for, in his bitter reproaches that immediately followed, he omitted this accusation. Clearly, she knew nothing of the regicide unless she guessed it from this remark of Hamlet's. Today most critics clear her of this charge, perhaps because they think of her as too "weak" to have been Claudius' accomplice.

On the other hand, most critics accept the charge against Gertrude that she was Claudius' mistress during the lifetime of the Elder Hamlet; and Professor Bradley, one of the most popular *Hamlet* critics, even builds upon this putative adultery a whole interpretation of the tragedy: that Hamlet's entire conduct during the last four acts was dominated by melancholy that resulted from this shocking revelation of his mother's despicable character.⁹ Professor Elton, on the other hand, dryly remarks that he can find in the text no proof of Gertrude's adultery.¹⁰ The importance of the question certainly demands a careful sifting of all available evidence. The charge seems to arise especially from the Ghost's denouncing Claudius as an "adulterate beast." Even if one take "adulterate," or "adulterous" in its strictest modern sense, it may well refer merely to Claudius' intentions or desires, and not to an accomplished fact involving Gertrude. Such a sense appears in the Bible when the sinner is warned not to commit adultery "in his heart." "Adulterate," however, in Elizabethan times, retained something of its wide etymological meaning, as appears in its uses in the New Testament and in Canon Law, and so might refer to any act or thought that was "unchaste" or "lewd."¹¹ According to Schmidt's *Shakespeare-Lexicon*, moreover, Shakespeare himself so used it in *Richard III*, in

⁹ A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London, 1926).

¹⁰ O. Elton, *A Sheaf of Papers* (London, 1922), p. 26.

¹¹ See *N.E.D.*, *s.v.* Before 1650, incest came under Canon Law. In 1563, the table of prohibited degrees (*Levit.*, 18, 6-18) was re-enacted; and the canons of 1603 required that a copy be set up in every church. See C. Viner, *General Abridgment* (Aldershot [1758]), XV, 254 ff.

the *Sonnets*, and, one might add, in the first quarto of *Hamlet*.¹² Thus when the Ghost calls Claudius "that incestuous, that adulterate beast," the two adjectives seem to be purely a synonymous intensification, referring only to the incestuous marriage; and the order of the adjectives, furthermore, suggests that they cannot allude to two separate acts or conditions; for, in that case, "adulterate" should precede.

This matter of the order that the Ghost gives to the murder and to the sexual misdeeds of Gertrude has been somewhat misstated. Professor Bradley cites the line in question as proof that Gertrude was the mistress of Claudius during the lifetime of her first husband: "This is surely the most natural interpretation of the words of the Ghost, coming, as they do, before his account of the murder."¹³ As a matter of fact, however, the line comes *after* the account of the murder and the "forgèd process" by which public opinion was deceived. The Ghost has ended by accusing Claudius; Hamlet breaks in with an exclamation; and then the Ghost continues with a reference to the incest, and after that uses the adjective "adulterate," and declares that Claudius won the love of Gertrude. Then, after fifteen lines, chiefly on Gertrude's conduct, he returns to a more detailed discussion of the murder. Finally, he summarizes his entire message, presumably in the order of events:

Thus was I sleeping, by a brother's hand,
Of life, of crown, of queen, at once dispatch'd. . . .

The present writer would contend that the order that the Ghost employs, both in his statement at length and in his summary, clearly implies that the Ghost lost his Queen after, and not before, he lost his life; and Professor Bradley's own evidence thus turns against him. This same order reappears in Hamlet's lines late in the play, after he knows that Gertrude was innocent of the regicide, "a father kill'd, a mother stain'd," and again, "He who hath kill'd my king and whored my mother." "Whored," in the common Elizabethan sense

¹² See line 1539. Cf. *Measure for Measure*, III, i, 139.

¹³ Bradley, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

of "debauched," easily refers to the marriage, which being incestuous, was null and void, so that Claudius and Gertrude according to strict law were living in adultery like Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon. In the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, their marriage had required a special dispensation from the Pope. Surely, it is significant that on the several occasions when the regicide and Gertrude's sin are spoken of together, the regicide is regularly put first. If the arrangement of these episodes in the speech of Hamlet and of the Ghost is significant—and Professor Bradley clearly considers it significant—then the union of Claudius and Gertrude followed the regicide; and the terms "adulterate" and "whor'd" must refer to this marriage, which was strictly not a marriage.

Incest alone easily accounts for the bitterness of Hamlet's reproaches against his mother and for her own guilty conscience; and surely it would likewise account for the Ghost's slur against his "seeming-virtuous queen." The fact that the "incest" occurred between two persons who were of no blood relationship made it no less illegal and no less shocking to the public mind; for the objection to incest arose not only from its genetic consequences but also for reasons of family and governmental discipline and policy; the law was specially intended to guard against such abuses as the seduction by an older member of the family of some child placed under his charge;¹⁴ and its object was to widen family connections, like the old tribal custom of exogamy. Public opinion was so bitter against incest, even when there were no ties of blood between the two parties, that Henry VIII was able to use it to dissolve his marriage with Catherine and legalize his connection with Anne Boleyn; and, indeed, any supporter of Queen Elizabeth's right to the throne was obliged to look on such incest as wicked. A marriage with a deceased wife's sister was not legalized in England until the twentieth century; and even a union with a deceased wife's sister's daughter, or any union within three degrees of relationship, was against the

¹⁴ M. Bacon, *New Abridgment of the Law* (Philadelphia, 1811), IV, 526 ff.

law.¹⁵ James I classified incest with witchcraft, sodomy, poisoning, and false-coinage, as "horrible crimes" that he instructed his son, "ye are bound in conscience neuer to forgiue."¹⁶ In Scotland, it was punishable by death, and so also in England in 1650 when the civil courts took over from the ecclesiastical authority the enforcement of morals. It was "wicked,"¹⁷ and "should not once be accounted under the name of marriage."¹⁸ Shakespeare again and again reflects this utter horror of the crime: in *Lucrece*, it is "that abomination"; it is "foul" in *Pericles*; *Measure for Measure* uses it as a comparison of the deepest infamy; and it supports the climax of Lear's curse addressed to the "great gods." Surely, such a violation of decency accounts for Hamlet's bitterness and for Gertrude's sense of sin.

More than all this, the antecedent action of the play furnishes ample evidence against Gertrude's adultery. The wooing of Claudius is depicted, not as a slow development during his brother's lifetime, but as so speedy that the Ghost, like Brabantio in *Othello*, imputes it to "witchcraft." He specifically mentions only "damnèd incest"; and surely in an age that still remembered the *causes célèbres* of Anne Boleyn and Catherine Howard, so honorable a king could not have passed over the personal outrage of cuckoldry to himself and the consequent crime of treason in his Queen. Hamlet, furthermore, declares that just before his father's death, his mother would "hang on him, As if increase of appetite had grown By what it fed on," and she had walked in the funeral procession, "Like Niobe, all tears": is this a Gertrude that has already forsaken him for a lover whom she will shortly marry? Or is this weak and vacillating Gertrude of the Bradley critics capable of acting a part that utterly deceived her son and the whole court? In the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, she clearly preferred her former

¹⁵ See Coke, *Institutes* (London, 1809), II, 683; and the Statute 32 Henry VIII, c. 38, based on Levit. 18. Not only relationship by consanguinity but also by "affinity or alliance" barred marriage. Coverdale's *Christen State of Matrimonye* (ed. princ., 1541) contains tables of consanguinity and affinity.

¹⁶ James I, *op. cit.*, p. 20; and *State Trials* (London, 1809), pp. 299 ff.

¹⁷ H. Smith, *Works* (1867), II, 368.

¹⁸ Harpsfield, *Divorce of Henry VIII*, ed. Camden, p. 238.

husband, and was "melancholy" at his loss; in this earlier version, moreover, Hamlet accuses her of weeping "crocodile tears" at his death; but Shakespeare deliberately omits this accusation: if he conceived it as being true, surely he would have left it in. In short, this rapid wooing seems to have taken place entirely since the regicide. Most significant, furthermore, if Gertrude had been Claudius' secret mistress, surely, like Lady Macbeth, she would have been privy to the murder: at all events, she must have guessed it from the play-within-the-play. Surely, she would have thought her husband's death too convenient for her lover to be mere accident. The theory that she had been Claudius' mistress makes her at once so subtle as to deceive the whole court with her pretended love for the Elder Hamlet and her pretended mourning for his loss, and at the same time so stupid that Claudius never told her of the murder and that she never guessed it. Which horn of this dilemma would the followers of Professor Bradley prefer to accept?

Not only does the theory that Gertrude was Claudius' mistress fail to fit facts of the antecedent action; but it also runs counter to the dialogue of the play itself. In neither the first quarto nor the standard version does Gertrude show, even in the most intimate scenes any special affection for Claudius, though she constantly does so for Hamlet and even for Ophelia. She regularly speaks both of him and to him in formal fashion as "Denmark" or as "my lord." She uses "thee" and "thou" to Hamlet; but, almost in the same breath, she uses the more formal "you" to Claudius; and, in their most private discourse, never once do husband and wife lapse into the "thee" and "thou" of Antony and Cleopatra. Moreover, had Gertrude really been as infatuated with him as these critics would suppose, would she not have defended his character to Hamlet in the scene in her private apartment? Truly, this cannot be a depiction of a grand passion, so overwhelming that the lovers do not stop at regicide and incest. To Claudius, perhaps it was; but could it have been so to Gertrude?

The evidence of the early versions of the play points in the

same direction. In the first quarto, Hamlet describes the play-within-the-play as "very neere the murder of my father"; and, in the standard text, he revised it to represent the event as he supposed it to have happened. In both cases, the murderer gets the love of his victim's wife apparently after, and not before, the murder. Hamlet, moreover, apparently did not think that Gertrude had made a cuckold of his father; and, in the prayer-scene and in the closet-scene, though he accuses his aunt-mother of incest with reiterated bitterness, he never mentions adultery. In *Belleforest*, to be sure, the Queen was faithless to her first husband; but this element seems quite to have passed out of the story by the time that Shakespeare wrote; for, in the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, though Claudius "burns with love for the wife of his brother," she apparently does not return the sentiment, and has nothing to accuse herself of but destroying her son's immediate chances for the throne by an incestuous marriage, which, however, the Pope had allowed. In the first quarto also, there seems to be no adultery. Surely, if Shakespeare had intended to alter the popular stage-version of the story, he would have made the change particularly evident, instead of allowing everything to point in the opposite direction.

In short, Gertrude did not commit adultery, excepting as that crime is included in an incestuous, and thus illegal, marriage. The word "adulterate" and the other vague charges of Hamlet and the Ghost against her seem to refer entirely to incest. Gertrude's sin is mentioned again and again as coming *after* the regicide. Had Hamlet and the Ghost believed her guilty of adultery, they surely would have dwelt on this serious charge, which carried with it the disgrace of cuckoldry to the husband and the high crime of treason to the Queen. The speed of the wooing, furthermore, and the Queen's apparent affection for her first husband, certainly do not suggest that she had for some time been Claudius' mistress. These two, moreover, had their marriage been the outcome of a grand passion, would surely have referred to the fact in their intimate conversation, or at least they would have expressed their

love when they were alone: the Queen would "hang upon" her former husband; but to Claudius, she does not even use "thee" and "thou." The versions, moreover, from which the standard text immediately derives, show no adultery, but rather present the second wedlock as a mere marriage of convenience to settle the succession; and, if Shakespeare had intended to change the accepted stage-version, he would have been obliged to make this change particularly clear. He certainly did not do so. Indeed, why should he have added adultery to the antecedent action? It makes Gertrude's ignorance of the regicide very improbable, and is not essential to any element later in the play, for incest was quite a sufficient motive. The present writer ventures to assert that the foregoing facts at the least put a considerable burden of proof on any critic who cares to assert that Queen Gertrude was guilty of adultery during the lifetime of the Elder Hamlet.

The third charge against Queen Gertrude is usurpation of the throne that Hamlet felt was his. Such a charge takes no account of the old story, as it came to Shakespeare's hand. Among the early Germanic tribes, kingship was elective; but the choice usually fell on the nearest blood relation of the last king, especially the eldest son if he seemed capable. In the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, such an "election" is mentioned; and, in the standard Shakespeare text, Hamlet refers to Claudius as having "Popp'd in between the election and my hopes," before he could get back from Wittenberg. At the end of the play, moreover, Hamlet foresees another such "election," and, as he dies, casts his vote for Fortinbras. In the Belleforest narrative, it is clearly Gertrude who, like Queen Elizabeth, and like Mary II, daughter of James II and wife of William III, had the lineal claim; and her marriage successively to the two brothers appears to be a concession to the requirements of a turbulent age for masculine governance. In Shakespeare's text also, Gertrude is "the imperial jointress of this warlike state," and not a mere queen consort, as she appears in the second act of the *Bestrafte Brudermord*. The Elizabethans, who were dynastically minded, would understand such matters from the

merest hint. Werder has once and for all absolved Claudius from the charge of usurpation; and even Laertes at the head of his angry mob never thinks of accusing either the King or the Queen of it. Furthermore, according to the unchallenged statement of Claudius in his initial address before the assembled court, "discretion," not lust or ambition, was the author of the marriage; and Elizabethan dramatists do not mislead their audiences by introducing an important character with an utterly false clue as to his motives and designs. Indeed, economic conditions made "discretion" the usual motive for Elizabethan marriages.¹⁹ The player-queen, moreover, says that such second marriages are actuated by "base respects of thrift but none of love"; and likewise, early in the tragedy, Hamlet himself caustically informs Horatio that "thrift" brought about this hasty union. After imputing the marriage to "discretion," Claudius goes on to say that the whole court had been consulted and had approved; and then he passes at once to Fortinbras' rebellion, which any Elizabethan would take as the obvious reason for haste in settling the succession and in providing a man of age and experience to meet the national emergency, and which Shakespeare added to the play doubtless partly for just this purpose. Fortinbras, who thinks Denmark "disjoint and out of frame," hopes to take advantage of the change of rulers. England, likewise, has refused its usual tribute. The dangers of an interregnum in the days when the king was the center of power in the state, appear not only in such plays as *Lear* and *Measure for Measure*, but in actual contemporary history in the widespread fear of civil war between rival claimants at the death of Queen Elizabeth, which was then impending, and in the extraordinary speed with which James I hastened to make good his claim. Thus the marriage of Gertrude and Claudius was a political necessity, obvious to the Elizabethans, and aggravated by the danger of rebellion in Norway. Perhaps Gertrude should have "mourn'd longer"; doubtless strict propriety would have looked on a marriage within a "month"

¹⁹ See H. P. Pettigrew, *The Elizabethan Lover in Shakespeare's Comedies*, about to appear.

as "o'erhasty"; and perhaps she should have stayed the election until Hamlet could present himself as a candidate; but neither ~~Polonius nor the other nobles and courtiers~~ question either the legality or the expediency of what was done; and one must not forget that sixteenth-century England willingly accepted the matrimonial experiments of Henry VIII, if only he would have a male heir to settle the succession, and so save England from the danger of another War of the Roses. Surely, the Elizabethans would see Gertrude's marriage in a similar light; and the additional dangers of revolt in Norway and in England would make it seem not only expedient but politically unavoidable.

The one crime that remains is incest. In the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, the Pope had "allowed the marriage"; but the circumstances of Shakespeare's play gave no time for messengers to go to and fro between Rome and Elsinore, and indeed such a Papal dispensation was not palatable to the Elizabethan audience, for no patriotic supporter of the Queen could admit that the Papacy had such power. In Shakespeare, Gertrude confesses to the sin of incest, and quite understands Hamlet's reproaches against it. But both the Ghost and Hamlet condemn her, not only for this, but even more for her poor taste in marrying so far beneath the level of her former husband's character. In her defense, one might remark not only that the marriage was essential to the state, but also that Claudius, as evidenced by his initial oration and by the scene with Laertes and the mob, was a more kingly person than Hamlet and his father, whose views were prejudiced, were willing to admit. The theme of incest appears several times; and the closely parallel case of Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon, which lay behind the legitimacy of Elizabeth's own birth and her right to the throne, made the situation in the play all the clearer to the audience; and, though Gertrude's culpability was palliated by political necessity, yet it was serious enough to supply sufficient motive for Hamlet's bitter reproaches; and, in the closet-scene, she was perhaps more disturbed by the effect of her deed on Hamlet than by the deed itself.

In short, the Queen of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, like the Queen of the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, is guilty of neither murder, adultery, nor usurpation; and the politically minded Renaissance would have looked upon her incestuous marriage as reasonable, if not altogether justified. One can hardly, therefore, point to a career of wickedness as proof that Gertrude was a weakling or the "slave" to an unreasoning passion for Claudius. On the contrary, she met a national crisis with a marriage, more of convenience than of love; and, throughout the play, her efforts are bent on conciliating her son to this arrangement, efforts that the Ghost frustrated by informing him of the initial regicide.

The crucial scene in the relations of son and mother is the long dialogue in Gertrude's private "closet," in which she begins by trying to reduce him to submission to King Claudius, and seems to end by being won over, at least passively, to Hamlet's point of view. She starts by upbraiding him for having his "father much offended," though, being ignorant of the regicide, she apparently imputed this offense to the reference in the play to second marriages. Hamlet replies by calling her her "husband's brother's wife," an insulting remark that she can hardly overlook, and insists that she listen to a recital of her sins. He forces her into a chair; she, fearing violence, cries out for help; Polonius also calls; and Hamlet, supposing him to be the King in hiding, kills him at once. Hamlet then turns to the immediate business of coming to an understanding with his mother. He accuses her of incest, of haste, and of ill-judgment, in her second marriage. The Queen seems to admit these faults, and is reduced quite to contrition; she is doubtless overcome, not only by the sin itself but by the loss of her son's respect. Just then, the Ghost appears and urges the Prince once more to his revenge; and Gertrude, hearing her son converse with "the incorporeal air," takes him for mad. Hamlet, fearful lest she discount all his accusations as mere lunacy, offers her proofs that he is sane, and again urges her to repent and to forsake the love of Claudius. Apparently his proofs convince her; for she asks his advice as to her future

course, a thing that she would hardly do of a madman. Again he urges her to avoid Claudius, and, above all, to be secret and not divulge that his madness is but feigned. This secrecy she promises to keep, and she does not break her promise. As the son takes his leave, he regrets that she is not yet in a state of grace so that he may have her blessing, as Laertes had the blessing of Polonius when he set out for France; and he asks forgiveness for omitting this customary filial act and for having spoken to her in so unfilial a manner. Thus the two part, Hamlet shortly to be sent to England, Gertrude to tell the King of Polonius's death, and excuse it as best she can without divulging anything of her long talk with Hamlet. If she thought him mad, or his attitude quite unjustified, would she not have given Claudius some account of a conversation so important that Polonius himself played eavesdropper to report it? In the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, Hamlet makes no effort to prove his sanity, but rushes out of the room at once after his talk with the Ghost; and his mother, as she shows in a soliloquy that Shakespeare omits, is more convinced than ever that he is crazy. In the first quarto, on the other hand, she apparently accepts his protestations of sanity, evades the King's questions as to the interview by saying that Hamlet was "raging as the sea"; she refers to her "sick soul," as if she took her son's accusations deeply to heart and, from then on in the play, she seems to side with her son against her husband. In this, as in other quarto texts, however, she tells Claudius at Ophelia's grave that his actions are mere "madness"; but, in the folio version, Shakespeare, as if trying to excise every passage that might possibly mislead the audience, transfers these lines to Claudius, and so leaves us with the evident inference that after the closet scene, Gertrude thinks Hamlet sane, and gives her sympathy to him rather than to the King—a point of view made all the more convincing by the fact that she clearly loves her son more than she loves her second husband. In the standard text, moreover, her references late in the play to her "sick soul" and her "sin" suggest that she has taken very seriously Hamlet's upbraiding of her conduct. The death of

Polonius has removed from her an ally on the side of compromise; the King wins Laertes completely to his party: thus toward the end of the play, Gertrude stands alone for a policy of conciliation. When Hamlet returns, she still tries to patch up peace between the two protagonists; but Hamlet has now no doubt as to Claudius' guilt; and Claudius now is fully aware of his immediate danger. Claudius plots with Laertes to destroy the Prince; and, though Gertrude with her dying breath risks the hatred of her husband to warn Hamlet of the poison, he falls a victim to the plot, and dies.

Shakespeare's queens, whatever their personal shortcomings, are always queenly: in the Renaissance conception of things, it could not be otherwise. What sort of woman, then, was Gertrude? Her bodily and psychological humor, though not clearly marked, would seem, like her son's natural self, to have been of the sanguine type, appropriate to royalty:²⁰ she always strives and hopes for better things, that, with a tragic irony, always elude her. Her character and motives should be judged, less by her son's sharp comment in the first half of the play than by her own speech and actions; for, in acted tragedy, deeds, gestures, and expressions of countenance would be far more vivid than in the printed versions used by critics, where her few lines leave her character too much to be judged by the remarks of others. Hamlet would naturally regard her as weak: how else can one excuse the seeming faults of those we love? And Hamlet was hardly so unprejudiced as to admit that her sudden marriage was anything but a fault. He and the Ghost, however, seem to be the only persons that regard it so. Is his declaration about "frailty" then to be applied to Gertrude more seriously than his accusation that she is a "most pernicious woman"? She appears as a wife, as a mother, as a queen; and, in all three characters, she seems to approximate, if not the Elizabethan ideal, at least the Elizabethan norm: as a wife, she is generally retiring, though within her province she asserts her independence; as a mother, she is deeply affectionate, and, indeed, after the closet scene seems to

²⁰ C. Dariot, *Judgement of the Starres* (London, 1598), sig. D 2 v.

side more with Hamlet than with Claudius; her position as a queen, probably her chief role in Elizabethan eyes, shows her dignified, gracious, resourceful, and not too officious in affairs of state. In the scene with the mad Ophelia, she has a compassionate tenderness; in that with the angry Laertes, more than a little courage; and her dying breath warns the son that she loved to beware of the poison. Is this a fickle Cressida or an ardent Cleopatra? Is this a wicked queen like Goneril, or Regan, or Lady Macbeth? She tries at once to save her kingdom and to reconcile her son to an incestuous marriage that policy required. The marriage attained its immediate purpose; but her son, though at first he seems to relent and yields to her request to stay in Denmark, is utterly alienated from Claudius by the message of the Ghost and by the proof that the play-within-the-play supplies; and, by a supreme irony, in the resulting dynastic catastrophe, this very Fortinbras, against whose ambitions she had contrived, inherits both his kingdom and her own, and the very son for whom she had tried to save the throne gives Fortinbras his dying vote.

The tragedy of Gertrude's life, and in some sense of the play, is the growing breach between her second husband and her son; and her "most great affliction of spirit" is caused by the play-within-the-play that she had hoped would lead Hamlet on to courtly diversions and that instead, by an irony that she does not understand, completed the breach between him and Claudius. Such an interpretation of her character takes her out of the realm of melodrama, gives her a dignity and a tenderness consistent with her relations to her two husbands and her son and with the Elizabethan conception of a queen, shows why she could be so passionately beloved, and explains the crucial part of Fortinbras at the beginning and at the conclusion of the tragedy.²¹ On the other hand, Shakespeare had to retain the main sympathy of the audience for Hamlet; we must see the action mainly through his eyes; and so the motives and the tragic career of Gertrude could be sketched

²¹ Though Fortinbras is Shakespeare's own addition, he "simply contributes nothing to the drama." H. R. Walley, "Shakespeare's Conception of Hamlet," *PMLA*, XLVIII, 783 ff.

only lightly in the background, and at times are actually obscured by the bitter outbursts of her son.

The Romantic interpretation of Shakespeare's characters has been carried quite too far; and, even among scholars, it still is too much with us. His women are not "insignificant,"²² or "mere creatures of his dreams."²³ They are not just the expression of a single overwhelming passion like Marlowe's heroes, or of one steadfast humor like Jonson's comic figures. Much less are they the stuff of morality plays, or of Victorian melodrama, with its spotless heroines and "heavy" villains. Shakespeare's plots, to be sure, are crowded with action, much of it extraordinary; but his dramatic method would seem to be to enhance the power of these telling plots by interpreting the characters, which came to his hand from history or from contemporary Italy or from folklore, as if they were Englishmen and women of his own day, typical, like Chaucer's pilgrims, of their several social planes. Thus he gave motive to character and verisimilitude to action. An extraordinary story must be wedded to immediate reality if it is to arouse sympathy, or even be convincing. Art that is unreal may surprise and even exhilarate, but it has no depth of meaning or *ethos*. It is this reality, expressive of insight and significance, that Shakespeare gave to the characters of his sources. He created for the Elizabethans men in their own image, neither weak nor strong, neither good nor bad, in any absolute sense, undergoing the test of trying circumstance, to surmount it, or succumb, much as they would in life. Thus his tragedy is often Aristotelian in its picture of a "good" man, an Othello or a Lear, overcome, like Oedipus, by the torrent of events. Like Oedipus, Gertrude did not know the antecedent action, the initial regicide, that set her plans at nought; like him, she is a victim of her human ignorance; and her part in the play is fraught with dramatic irony that arises from what she does not understand: the reconciliation that she wishes was impossible from the start. To be sure, this is not poetic justice;

²² Nicoll, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

²³ E. E. Stoll, "Cleopatra," *M. L. R.*, XXIII, 145.

but the Renaissance interpreted Christian ethics with a Calvinistic severity; and those nineteenth-century critics who would find a "moral" in its art, are all too liable to go astray. Such interpretation erases finer touches, and turns the characters into mere puppets of vice or virtue. Gertrude is no slave to lust: as in the case of Henry VIII, if her object had been mere lust, why bother about marriage in an age of royal mistresses and paramours? She is an Elizabethan lady of high station, faced with a dynastic and domestic problem that was hopeless from the first, and that, in her failure to solve it, overwhelms all the principals in the catastrophe. Her character has indeed a queenly dignity; and her action in the play the universal pathos of baffled and frustrated human effort.²⁴

²⁴ Since the original publication of the present study of Queen Gertrude in the *Revue Anglo-Américaine* in 1934, Professor R. M. Smith has brought out his paper on "Hamlet and Gertrude" in the *Shak. Assoc. Bull.*, April, 1936. Professor Smith's conclusions differ from mine only in that he thinks the Queen guilty of adultery.

CHAPTER IX

KING CLAUDIUS

"ALMOST EVERYTHING that has been written about this drama is out of focus, for Claudius is either belittled or disregarded." So writes Professor Kittredge.¹ Claudius was a King; and kingship was no slight matter to the Renaissance. The decline of feudalism and of the Church, the two great cohesive institutions of medieval society, had left the royal power the chief mainstay against anarchy; and, in order to assume these new responsibilities, it had to be magnified. In England especially where the comparative safety from invasion and the parsimony of successive Parliaments left the government unprovided with a standing army, the royal power had to exert its sway altogether by the peaceful arts of diplomacy rather than by force; and this necessity for an enhanced prestige at home, and also repeated conflicts with the Papacy and Spain, made the English monarchy more and more claim for itself the religious attributes formerly accorded to the Pope. The Anglican clergy, moreover, desirous of justifying Henry VIII in his breach with Rome, were strongly inclined, like the Gallicans in France under Louis XIV, to make the King, in place of the Pope, the well-spring of divine authority.² Thus when the Jesuits, who were the special champions of Papal power, opposed the accession of James I to the English throne because he was a heretic, his natural defense was to assume a religious prerogative for his rule, declare himself "God's lieutenant upon earth,"³ and base his claim to the Crown squarely on the Divine Right of Kings.

For England, this was a significant departure, not only because it sanctioned and regularized the Tudor assumption of

¹ G. L. Kittredge, *Shakspeare* (Cambridge, 1924), p. 40.

² See J. W. Allen, *Political Thought in the Sixteenth Century* (New York, 1928); and J. N. Figgis, *The Divine Right of Kings* (Cambridge, 1922).

³ James I, *Political Works*, ed. McIlwain (Cambridge, [Mass.] 1918), pp. 281, 307, etc.

practically absolute sovereignty, but also because it emphasized the Renaissance science of politics, a science that was for years kept constantly before the public eye in sermons and in the writings of the King and his supporters, against the Jesuits and their adherents. As early as 1594, Fr. Parsons, S.J., had attacked the right of James; and Wentworth, who answered him in 1598, and James himself in his *Trew Law of Free Monarchies*, defended his claim on the basis of Divine Right. His *Basilikon Doron*, moreover, written to instruct his son in the art of "kingcraft," his statements at the time of his accession and his later speeches before Parliament, the oath required after the Gunpowder Plot in 1606, and the royal polemics against Cardinals Bellarmine and du Perron and the Pope, all served to promulgate the political theory by which James held his throne; and so inexorably was this theory connected with Divine Right that a dramatist, especially a court-dramatist who purveyed to the taste of the monarch and his entourage, could hardly depict a rightful king like Duncan, or a usurper like Macbeth, without making his plot and characters accord with Divine Right: Duncan's rule must be beneficent, and Macbeth's a wicked tyranny.⁴ During this period, Shakespeare was becoming, more and more, the dramatist of the court; and, at the accession of James I, his company became the "King's Men." Shortly before this accession, *Hamlet* was written; and shortly after it, once or more revised: surely, therefore, King Claudius must have some of the royal dignity inherent in the theory of Divine Right. The contemporary idea of tragedy, moreover, descended from Seneca and, stated by such practical playwrights as Heywood and Shirley, required that drama "give instruction in affairs of state" by the fitting depiction of princes and governments.⁵ Thus reasons of general appeal, of court interest, and of dramatic theory, all united to make Shakespeare give emphasis and verisimilitude to the political

⁴ See the present writer, "Political Themes in Shakespeare's Later Plays," *J. E. G. Ph.*, XXXV, 61 ff.; and "*Macbeth* as a Compliment to James I," *Eng. St.*, LXXII, 207 ff.

⁵ See A. H. Gilbert, "Seneca and Elizabethan Tragedy," *P. Q.*, XIII, 370 ff.

aspects of *Hamlet*, and would surely require him to represent the King adequately as God's Anointed.

Not only is Claudius a king, but, after the title role, he is the most important character in the play. In over half the scenes, he has a speaking part. The other figures come and go at his behest. When he and Hamlet are first introduced, he is enthroned in state; he delivers an adroit and pithy address to the court, and from his dais dominates the stage far more than does the melancholy Prince, who for some sixty lines has neither speech nor action: Shakespeare was too good a dramatist to introduce in such a way a character of less than primary dramatic value. During Hamlet's abortive trip to England, moreover, Claudius is the center of the plot; and, aside from Hamlet's, all the soliloquies save one are his. In comparison with the first quarto, furthermore, the dramatist apparently much more than doubled the King's lines to make the full final text: the part of Claudius, in fact, is lengthened more than any other role, including Hamlet's. Despite all this, most critics have either "belittled or disregarded" him, and have taken small account of the exalted office that to Elizabethans must have colored his whole character. Bradby thinks him "tame" and not even a "convincing villain";⁶ Nicoll says that Claudius "hardly does anything of serious consequence,"⁷ and catalogues his "evil qualifications" as "sensuality, ambition, and boorishness."⁸ Actors, moreover, usually present him as the mere ranting villain of melodrama, or as the conventional stage-king of lath-and-plaster.⁹ Some critics, on the other hand, hold a different view. Ulrici was perhaps the first to discuss the play in its political aspect as a great dynastic tragedy;¹⁰ and this prepared the way for the interpretation of Claudius as a Renaissance potentate. Bodenstein attempted a reasoned *apologia*, and summarized his view: "Claudius is a bad man, but a monarch who understands how to rule, and in practical

⁶ G. F. Bradby, *Short Studies* (London, 1929), pp. 154-155.

⁷ A. Nicoll, *Studies in Shakespeare* (London, 1931), p. 39.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁹ H. M. Jones, *The King in Hamlet* (Austin, Texas, 1918 [1921]), p. 10.

¹⁰ *Hamlet*, Furness var. ed., II, 293.

prudence and force of will far excells Hamlet."¹¹ Miss Henneke noted that Shakespeare's aristocratic bias made him picture his kings as kingly;¹² and Professor Dover Wilson seems to recognize the ability and the dramatic complexity of Claudius, but in his whole volume on the play never gives him systematic treatment.¹³ Professor Jones sees in the King a great figure who "instantly commands the obedience of every person in the tragedy save the malcontents, Hamlet and Fortinbras. Polonius is his loyal servitor, Cornelius and Voltimand run his errands. Osric is his agent. Horatio and Marcellus announce themselves as 'friends to this ground and liegemen to the Dane.' Rosencrantz and Guildenstern accept a dangerous and difficult task without a murmur, and in the course of that mission go to their deaths. . . . And—final tribute—the Danish populace toils night and day at the behest of one who Hamlet and the Ghost would have us believe is a mere adulterate beast. . . ." ¹⁴ He blames the wide currency of the opposite interpretation on the "star" system of the modern stage. Professor Beatty, in similar vein, considers Claudius "a worthy adversary [of Hamlet], dangerous because of his intellect, his tact, his power of concealing his feelings under a smiling countenance."¹⁵ Indeed, the scholarly interpretation of this important figure is certainly divided.

The widespread derogation of King Claudius, like that of his Chamberlain, derives largely from the statements of Hamlet, who echoes them from the Ghost. Hamlet apparently had always thought ill of Claudius;¹⁶ and the Ghost calls the King a "serpent,"¹⁷ and launches forth on a diatribe beginning "that incestuous, that adulterate beast. . . ." Again and again, Hamlet applies to him epithets of stinging personal abuse: "villain" is his favorite word, with all its implications of meanness and low caste. He compares the King to a "slave," to a crude comic actor, to a cutpurse, whose unskilled

¹¹ *Ibid.*, II, 339.

¹² A. Henneke, *Shak. Jhb.*, LXVI, 79 ff.

¹³ J. Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet* (New York, 1935).

¹⁴ Jones, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-46.

¹⁵ J. M. Beatty, Jr., "The King in Hamlet," *Shak. Assoc. Bull.*, XI, 238 ff.

¹⁶ *Hamlet*, I, ii, 139, *passim*.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, I, v, 36 and 39.

craft had no honor even among thieves, and to a sneak-thief; Claudius is a mere harlequin-king; he is "kindless," i.e., lacking even in natural feelings; he is "this slave's offal"; his actions are "royal knavery," with all the social slur implied in the word "knave." These terms suggest a man, not only bad, but small and insignificant and weak. But even this is not enough: Hamlet declares him physically disgusting, a "satyr," a "mildew'd ear"; he is a toad, a bat, a common alley cat; and according to many modern texts, he is a "bloat king." This is strong language, so strong and spoken with such intensity and bitterness, that one may well ask how far the diatribe was justified. In contrast to all this, the other characters seem to treat Claudius with a strange consideration, not to say reverence. On the actual stage, even more telling than the mere speeches that dominate our impressions when we read, are the appearance and actions of a character. Claudius may be a criminal; but are not his crimes heroic rather than contemptible and low? And, furthermore, should his part be so portrayed that his person, dress and gesture suggest such terms as "mildewed" and "bloat," a bat, a toad, a scrawny cat?

The adjective "bloat" can be dismissed at once; indeed, its very inclusion in the modern texts illustrates the bias of the critics against Claudius. Upon this word, Blackstone erected a theory that the King was so intemperate that he had "already drunk himself into a dropsey."¹⁸ The association of those diseases, or rather symptoms, formerly designated "dropsey," with heavy drinking and with a bloated appearance of the body is quite correct; but, unfortunately for Blackstone's theory, Claudius is elsewhere described as lean rather than stout; he does not appear to have drunk more than Danish custom required; and the word "bloat" does not exist in any of the early texts. The comparisons of him to a "mildewed ear," a desert "moor," and a stray cat suggest rather the opposite of a "swag-bellied" physique. Claudius never appears on the stage as drunk, as do Cassio and Falstaff; his drinking seems to be entirely ceremonial; and the single time that Ham-

¹⁸ See Furness var. ed., *sub* III, iv, 182.

let accuses him of being "distempered" from his cups, he is obviously, as Hamlet very well knows, not drunk, but angry. Heavy drinking, indeed, was the custom in Denmark, as Hamlet himself observes, as Belleforest mentioned in his version of the story, and as the Elizabethans generally believed;¹⁹ and thus Claudius would seem to be comparatively abstemious rather than inebriate. Most significant of all, neither quarto nor folio text contains the word "bloat" on which the common conception of the King, and this theory in particular, are founded: the quarto has "blowt," which meant "naked" in the sixteenth century, and makes obvious sense in this passage: "Let the blowt king tempt you [Gertrude] to bed again"; the folio has "blunt," which Shakespeare uses again and again in its ordinary sixteenth-century meanings of "insensible, stupid, rude, unpolished, harsh, unfeeling," all of which are consonant with Hamlet's reiterated opinion of the King.

Even if one accept neither of the adjectives recorded in the early texts, "bloat" is not a happy emendation; for it is a nonce-word in Shakespeare; and, moreover, it cannot be accounted for in the ways that modern textual critics usually explain the slips of Shakespeare's copyists and printers. Such mistakes are regularly attributable either to misreading of the manuscript or to the so-called error of "foul case" in printing. The former mistake depends on there being such similarity of letters in Elizabethan handwriting that they could easily be confused: the script *a* and the script *w* of the period, however, are quite dissimilar, and apparently are not known to be confused anywhere else in Shakespeare:²⁰ thus "blowt" could hardly have been misread for "bloat." The Elizabethan *o* and *u*, likewise, do not confuse; and, consequently, "blunt" could hardly have been misread for "bloat." The error of a printer's "foul case" of type, moreover, will hardly explain any such slips as these: in the arrangement of a printer's case,

¹⁹ See *Shakespeare's England* (Oxford, 1917), I, 108-109. Cf. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

²⁰ On such confusions of letters, see L. Kellner, *Restoring Shakespeare* (New York, 1925), chap. iii, *passim*.

the boxes containing *a* and *w* are not adjacent;²¹ and it is no more likely that a printer would mistake one for the other than that a modern typist would strike one key for another that is nowhere near it. The boxes containing *o* and *w*, likewise, are too far apart to permit confusion. Surely then, the adjective "bloat" as applied to Claudius has as little justification as any word that commonly appears in Shakespeare's text: as an emendation, it is needless; it hardly conforms even to the other abusive epithets that Hamlet uses; it cannot be accounted for as a probable mistake of a transcriber or a printer; and it is so uncommon an Elizabethan word as to occur nowhere else in Shakespeare.

The question now remains how far the other opprobrious terms of Hamlet and the Ghost are justified, and how far they are the mere dramatic expression of the hatred that these two very naturally bore the King. To solve this problem, the motives and the doings of Claudius in the antecedent action of the play must be determined, and the events and policies of his reign, as shown during the five acts, must be understood and judged; for one must never forget that Shakespeare's plays were written for the stage, not for the closet; and, on the stage, appearance and action are more obvious and impressive than mere words. In the light of all this evidence, interpreted in terms of the ideas and social background of the age, the character of Claudius as a man and as a king must be determined and his significance in the drama nicely evaluated and defined.

Before Claudius became king, he led a life at his brother's court that must have been far from pleasant. Hamlet says that the courtiers "made mows" at him, and elsewhere describes the amenities that one might expect from those who held one in contempt:

Who calls me villain? breaks my pate across?
Plucks off my beard, and blows it in my face?
Tweaks me by the nose? gives me the lie i' the throat,
As deep as to the lungs?

²¹ See R. B. McKerrow, *Bibliography* (Oxford, 1929), p. 9.

Elizabeth's courtiers were tumultuous and brawling,²² even in the Presence Chamber and in the church; and such as were not respected for their high place or for their swordsmanship must have led miserable lives. Hamlet's attitude toward Claudius at the beginning of the play seems to suggest that the latter had not enjoyed respect in the late King's household; and, even without this hint, an Elizabethan audience might well infer as much; for Claudius apparently occupied the unhappy position of a younger brother. By birth and often by education, his father, says Earle, "tasks him to be a gentleman, and leaves him nothing to maintain it."²³ No wonder that Claudius had left Denmark to serve as a mercenary "against the French."²⁴ In *As You Like It*,²⁵ and also perhaps in the Falstaff plays²⁶ and *Twelfth Night*,²⁷ Shakespeare gives realistic pictures of younger sons obliged to seek a living as they could in the Church, in the army, by thievery or by their wits.²⁸ The close organization of Elizabethan society left little room for those who could not step into their father's places. Claudius, moreover, was not of the truculent, carefree sort that would win popularity in the court of a "warlike state"; and, even after he was king, with all the awe and majesty of that great office, he felt himself less popular than Hamlet:²⁹ doubtless he suffered by comparison with the brilliant victories of his predecessor; for his victories were unobtrusive diplomatic triumphs, not the heroic spectacle of military conquest. Not alone the general misfortune of Claudius' place, or lack of place, at court; but also several special and impelling motives urged him to desperate action. In the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, "ambition" drove him to his

²² See Sutcliffe, *Lawes of Armes* (London, 1593), p. 326; L. Bryskett, *Discourses* (London, 1616), p. 215; James I, *Basiliſkon Doron* (1599); and W. Harrison, *Description of England*, *passim*.

²³ J. Earle, *Characters* (London, 1628), "A Younger Brother."

²⁴ *Hamlet*, IV, vii, 81 ff.

²⁵ See the present writer, "Orlando, the Younger Brother," *P. Q.*, XIII, 73 ff.

²⁶ See the present writer, "Sir John Falstaff," *R. E. S.*, VIII, 414 ff.; and "Falstaff's Robin and Other Pages," *S. P.*, to appear.

²⁷ See the present writer, "Sir Toby's Cakes and Ale," *Eng. Studies*, XX, 57 ff.

²⁸ See S. Rowlands, *The Runnagates Race*, ed. Hunt Club, No. XIX, 50 ff.

²⁹ *Hamlet*, IV, vii, 21 ff.

crimes; and, moreover, he fell deeply in love with the Danish princess who was his brother's Queen. In Shakespeare also, both of these motives are clearly indicated. Thus Claudius was impelled by two of the most powerful human feelings, love and ambition.

The course he took required powerful motives and an unflinching will. To the believer in Divine Right, regicide was the most atrocious of all crimes, comparable only to the Crucifixion. Even Elizabeth, though the presence of Mary Queen of Scots was a constant menace to her life and throne, hesitated for years before she permitted the execution of her rival; and even then pretended that it was done against her will. James I could hardly condone even the most justifiable tyrannicide;³⁰ for kings were God's "Lieutenants and Vicegerents";³¹ and their murder, a "detestable parricide."³² In 1649, even the Presbyterians, though they had little love for Charles I, could not bring themselves to countenance his execution, and broke with the Independents who demanded it. Such a crime was the cutting off of God's chosen shepherd of His flock, the head and protector of all society. Surely, the man who deliberately planned and executed such a deed, timing it cleverly when Hamlet was away from court, and veiling it in such secrecy that no one suspected it, was neither weak nor stupid.

The death of the Elder Hamlet caused an immediate crisis: secret revolt in Norway, and refusal of tribute from the recent British conquests. The dangers of even the briefest interregnum were most serious in an age when kings had the actual power; and England remembered the Wars of the Roses, and also was keenly conscious of the awkward uncertainty that accompanied Elizabeth's declining years without a direct heir. The dangers of civil war and of foreign attack were clear both to James and to his Roman Catholic rivals, and clearest of all to Cecil;³³ and, when Elizabeth at last did die, James hastened with prudent speed to London to assume his crown

³⁰ James I, *Political Works*, ed. cit., p. xvii.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 169.

³³ James I, *op. cit.*, pp. 187-188; and G. Mattingly, *PMLA*, XLVIII, 712 ff.

at once. In *Measure for Measure*, written at the time, Shakespeare depicts most vividly the evils of an interregnum under even the best of viceroys; and *Lear* portrays the difficulties of passing down a royal inheritance even to unquestioned heirs.³⁴ The crisis at Elsinore, therefore, was acute; and any Elizabethan would have understood it so. Hamlet was far away, and seems to have been young; immediate action was imperative: Claudius had doubtless foreseen all of this. He himself is the obvious candidate. He is crowned; and, almost simultaneously, further to enforce his right, he marries Queen Gertrude, his chief potential rival, very much as Henry VII married the chief claimant of the rival House of York. Thus at one stroke, he gained both the throne he coveted and the woman he adored. His plan was perfect, and its working out was perfect. The marriage, to be sure, was hasty, and according to strict law incestuous; but, in the Renaissance, political necessity overruled such difficulties; and Claudius did not hesitate, in public before the assembled court, to attribute these arrangements to "discretion" and "wisest sorrow," and to remind the courtiers and ministers that they had all concurred. That he had been properly elected according to the old Germanic method of succession, seems quite clear.³⁵ Not even Hamlet in his anger or Laertes leading his mob against the palace ever call him a usurper; and, indeed, in their moments of greatest bitterness, they refer to him as "king." Polonius continues as chief minister, quite as Cecil continued in the reign of James I; and, a strict believer in Divine Right, he places his loyalty to Claudius on the same basis as his loyalty to God. The commons toil day and night and Sundays to put the nation in a state of defense against any who may challenge the new government. Claudius himself, moreover, though like Henry IV, he is keenly conscious of the "devious and crooked ways" by which he got the crown, declares him-

³⁴ See the present writer, "Political Themes," *ed. cit.*; and "The Occasion of 'King Lear,'" *S. P.*, XXXIV, 176 ff.

³⁵ In the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, Claudius had "appealed to the election of the states"; and, in the standard text, Hamlet says that Claudius had "Popp'd in between the election and my hopes." Cf. Jones, *op. cit.*, pp. 45 and 64; and J. P. Malleson, *T. L. S.*, Jan. 4, 1936, p. 15.

self without a qualm a rightful, God-appointed king; and, if Shakespeare had conceived him otherwise, he would have been made to act the part of cruel "tyrant" like Macbeth. In Scotland, the nobles flee or suffer death, and chaos reigns; but, in Denmark, as the play begins, the government is running so smoothly that even Fortinbras comes to terms without a struggle. Throughout the tragedy, the court affords Claudius its complete support: not only Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who do him their "best service," the reliable and efficient Cornelius and Voltimand, the "water-fly" Osric, the soldiers, Marcellus, Francisco, and Bernardo, and, above all, Polonius, who both respected him and feared his anger over Ophelia's love affair with Hamlet—not only all of these, but nameless others, whose "wisdoms" had approved the marriage, and who continue to act as the King's "wisest friends." Even Horatio seems surprised to learn of Claudius' machinations against Hamlet, so hard was it to think ill of royalty enthroned. Indeed, one wonders whether Claudius as a prince could have been quite as unpopular as Hamlet says; and Professor Jones even suggests that he was the court-candidate for the crown. At all events, the antecedent action depicts a Claudius who knew what he desired, and who proceeded to obtain it by the most secret, quickest, and most certain means.

Thus when the play begins, Claudius appears as a husband and as a king. His wedded life is exquisitely etched, albeit in the background of the plot. He married Gertrude for love, and it was a deep and lasting love. She married him in the midst of grief and perplexity to save the royal House of Denmark. Invariably, he treats her with dignified affection, from his very first reference to her in the initial speech from the throne, to the final scene in which he risks even his crown to warn her not to drink the poisoned wine. In public, he mentions her with formal deference as his "imperial jointress," and sometimes with more obvious affection as "my sweet queen"; and, in their most intimate scenes, he uses "your," not "thy"—even in the very speech with "my dear Gertrude"; he speaks to her in the strain of Brutus to Portia or of Othello

to his newly wedded Desdemona, not of Antony to Cleopatra; and the subject of their conversation is Hamlet's lunacy or affairs of state, not love and passion. If, as some critics claim, Claudius and Gertrude had had a previous amour, would not someone in the court at least have guessed it? And would not tongues have wagged at the late King's dying so conveniently? Indeed, everything in their married life points to the decorum of Elizabethan well-born domesticity; and, as in the case of Polonius and his children, there underlies, at least on Claudius' side, a deep affection: in the sincerity of soliloquy, he imputes the very regicide chiefly to love of Gertrude, and makes her the climax of his inner motives: "My crown, my own ambition and my queen"; and, moreover, to Laertes, he declares:

My virtue or my plague, be it either which,—
She's so conjunctive to my life and soul,
That, as the star moves not but in his sphere,
I could not but by her.

Wherein had the Elder Hamlet's love that greater "dignity" he claimed for it? Is this the unbridled passion of a "satyr"? Is Gertrude such a queen as would have endured the embraces of a satyr? Not Hamlet's diatribe, but Claudius himself, would paint his own character on the Elizabethan stage.

But Claudius was primarily a King. An Elizabethan saw the office rather than the individual; and Claudius therefore must be judged primarily by his kingship. His political technique depended on the pen rather than on the sword: his is not the glamor of military feudalism but the newer Renaissance conception of a king as a civil ruler balancing rival factions. This conception of royalty seems to have grown on Shakespeare as he learned more and more of the inner workings of an actual court: Henry V was the ideal of the dramatist and of his audience in the jingo days just after the Armada; in the greater security of the early seventeenth century, the ideal of royalty as depicted in his plays was less the military hero and more the governor, until in *Prospero*, we see a just and righteous monarch regain his throne, purely

by the arts of peace. Like a true diplomat, Claudius has a keen dramatic sense, even keener than that of Polonius: he has a sense of proper setting, and of proper speech and gesture, gracious yet dignified; he is always polite and smiling even under provocation; he is shrewd at the fundamental tasks of getting accurate information and adroit in managing those around him; he is swift and resourceful in deciding upon action and resolute in carrying out a plan; and all his thoughts and doings, he phrases in a style and rhetoric of imperturbable benevolence, and rarely, even under the keenest stress, betrays his inward purposes or feelings. Claudius was King and also diplomat.

Like Queen Elizabeth, he shows himself abroad in the surroundings proper to royalty. When he drinks in honor of Hamlet, the drums and canon speak. He keeps about him the noble and well-born. The early speech from the throne, the play, the final fencing match, all have the outward show of royalty, required by the commons in a king; and, when Hamlet calls him a very peacock, he seems to admit this pomp and circumstance. King James had urged that a king should never appear in public without all possible magnificence;³⁶ for this was the visible sign of his divinity as opposed to a mere usurper who must hide himself from his people. Up to the very final scene, indeed, life at the court of Denmark proceeds, despite the struggle that inwardly consumes it, with full decorum and panoply of rule.

But Claudius' government has not alone the show but also the reality of kingship; and his policies are based on all the information he can gleam, not only from Polonius and his spies, but also from his own close observation; and he shrewdly sifts all that he sees and hears. The first half of the play is a struggle between him and Hamlet for information of each other, like the skirmishes of armies before battle. Claudius strikes the keynote of their relationship at once by asking Hamlet why he persists in mourning: he wishes to understand the Prince's state of mind and motives, for motive

³⁶ King James I, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

is the clue to future action; the Prince, on his part, doubtful of the Ghost, wishes to know for certain whether Claudius killed the former King. Claudius wins some initial minor victories: Hamlet promises to stay in Denmark; the co-operation of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, of Polonius and Ophelia and of Gertrude, is assured; and Claudius embarks upon a policy of shrewd conciliation with his "son." But even the appointment of Hamlet as heir apparent does not seem to heal the breach. The Ghost reveals his secret. Hamlet assumes madness to evade further question; but Claudius doubts this madness, and uses it as a pretext to try Hamlet further without offending Gertrude. The Prince has refused to disclose himself to the direct and public question of the King; the King will now try indirection, and enlists Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to watch and question Hamlet, to learn the cause of his lunacy. The two young men have long been Hamlet's play-fellows; they hurry home from Wittenberg; but their all-too-timely coming arouses Hamlet's doubts. He tells them little: he seems to say that he is is not really mad and that he is ambitious; but, either through loyalty to Hamlet or through negligence, the two young courtiers apparently do not tell even this much to Claudius. Polonius breaks the news of the Prince's love affair with Ophelia; and Claudius resourcefully turns it at once to his advantage: Ophelia also must attempt to pluck the heart from Hamlet's mystery. The King himself overhears the lovers' talk, and is not deceived by Hamlet's strange behavior; but still he does not understand its motive: how much does Hamlet know? what does he want?—If not the Prince's bosom friends, if not his dear Ophelia, then perhaps his mother can learn the secret from him; and so the talk in Gertrude's closet is arranged; but, before it can take place, Hamlet himself has acted: the play has been given; and Claudius, now at last, knows that the Prince has learned of his father's murder. Now the tragedy passes into a new phase. Both men have learned what each one sought to know: Hamlet is sure of Claudius' crime, and realizes that he will stop at nothing; Claudius has

learned that Hamlet knows, that therefore Hamlet cannot be his friend, and that, on this account, his previous policy of conciliation is both useless and dangerous. Claudius had come to the play, delighted that by these festivities, Hamlet had apparently put a period to his mourning; he left it, chagrined at the failure of his policy and concerned at his personal danger.

Claudius must keep in mind all the entangled threads of the situation. He must be quick to decide and quick to execute—and so he is—and the men whom he employs, he must, without telling them too much, bend with dexterity to his will. Did any critics say that Claudius “hardly does anything of serious consequence”? He moves swiftly but with deliberate calculation: as James I advised his son, a king must do nothing in a “passion,” but nicely judge each means to its fit end. Is this an Antony forgetful of public business, enraptured in the arms of a Cleopatra? Those who would say that Claudius goes utterly to pieces during the play-within-the-play must at least admit that he collects himself again with lightning rapidity. Now he begins to profit by the policy of graciousness and tact that has made everyone his friend; for an enemy is a potential weakness, and this struggle will require all his strength. He constantly takes care not to offend “the distracted multitude,” though, as a man of the Renaissance, he really despises it; and he is always sensitive to popular opinion. He carefully avoids offending Gertrude also, and for her sake continues to play the outward role of Hamlet’s “loving father.” All these considerations, his policy must take into account; and Hamlet’s death must so be brought about that she will not suspect his part in it. With an instantaneous political acumen, he foresees the dangers and embarrassments of Hamlet’s killing Polonius, and he turns it to account by making it an excuse for the immediate sending of the Prince to England. To Gertrude, this must seem an act of clemency and prudence; and his “wisest friends” approve it: can anyone blame him if this journey ends in the Prince’s death? Moreover, Hamlet’s execution will be a *fait accompli* before

either his mother or the court or populace can know; and then they will have to be content with any plausible explanation that Claudius may give—very much as the shocked potentates of Europe had to accept Elizabeth's explanations for the "mistake" that caused the execution of Mary Queen of Scots. Meanwhile, he keeps informed also of Laertes' movements; and, when the irate son, furious at his father's death and unceremonious burial, leads his mob against the palace, the King, through either forethought or nimbleness of wit, skilfully seizes the occasion of the revolt, as he did the death of Polonius, to turn it to his own purposes. His management of Laertes, indeed, is consummate: never was Claudius more a king. Sedition, flaming out suddenly into the sin and evils of rebellion,³⁷ was one of the chief dangers of Renaissance government; and Bacon pointed out the need of princes for "some great person, one, or rather more, of military valour near unto them, for repressing of seditions."³⁸ Gertrude, to be sure, bore the first brunt of Laertes' violence; but Claudius did not for a moment lose his head. He reminded Laertes that, as King, he is God's Anointed—a King that his father helped to place upon the throne—then he cleverly falls into a familiar, almost paternal, tone, with "thee" and "thou," as he had used in the first act in speeding him to Paris. Laertes has no definite plan of action; and the King's ready sympathy and apparent candor quite disarm him; and Claudius succeeds in his favorite policy of making an enemy a friend. This sympathy and candor of the King may well be quite sincere; and yet Claudius, who never loses sight of politics, speaks with a conscious purpose; and later, like an actor just off the stage from a trying scene, he exclaims to Gertrude with some measure of relief, "How much had I to do to calm his rage!" Claudius is indeed a master of men and a musicianly performer on the complex instrument of human motives.

But Claudius is not only stage-manager, director, and

³⁷ Floyd, *Perfit Commonwealth* (London, 1600), chap. xlv; and James I, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

³⁸ F. Bacon, *Essays*, "Of Seditions and Treasons."

dramatist of the political tragedy of Denmark; he is also a consummate actor of a most exacting part: he must not only plot for his own ends, but also conceal his own true feelings and his plans. The throne-scene, which introduces him and his court, shows him the master of a finished and a winning platform style. With incidental compliments to Gertrude and the court, he first mentions the recent changes in the government; then he disposes of the Norwegian embassy, of Laertes' passport to Paris, and of Hamlet's proposed return to Wittenberg. In every case, he is successful; and, in all cases except Hamlet's, he achieves his will so graciously that he seems to personify that magnanimity that Spenser declared the sovereign virtue of all excellence, the predominant trait of Arthur in the *Faerie Queene*.³⁹ With a like courtliness, he compliments Polonius, and greets Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He tactfully ignores the intentional *gaucherie* of Hamlet, and thus appears to put the Prince quite in the wrong. Perhaps because of his conscience, perhaps because of Gertrude, he seems really to mean the conciliatory advances that he offers; and, if he had not meant them, he would hardly have announced his vote for Hamlet as Crown Prince. He is fatherly to Ophelia, and almost deferential to Polonius. Though he does "long to hear" the Chamberlain's theory of Hamlet's lunacy, yet he patiently contains himself throughout the audience with Cornelius and Voltimand and throughout Polonius' long introduction. Unlike the Queen, he does not even ask questions, though he has reason to be quite as much concerned; and, when Polonius at last explains his theory, Claudius, like a good diplomat, neither accepts nor rejects it, but asks for further proof. He is, indeed, an admirable actor; for, throughout the entire tragedy, he not only plays upon the motives of those about him, but also so conceals the prickings of his own conscience, and so carries his own "heavy burden" of self-accusation that the world, and even the woman he loves, never guess this inward struggle, never find him strangely moody or irritable, never suspect the secret of his

³⁹ See Spenser on "magnificence" in the prefatory letter to Raleigh.

guilt. He looks like the time, and so beguiles the time to marvellous perfection.

King Claudius, indeed, could keep his imperturbable mask of courtly graciousness, not only on all ordinary occasions, but also under the severest provocation. Truly, the play-within-the-play must have been "wormwood" to him; and yet he acts his part so perfectly, and has such iron self-control that he even dares to question Hamlet about the argument and the title of the piece. Though the plot, as set forth in the preliminary dumb show,⁴⁰ doubtless takes him by surprise, he displays the same poise as he does at the revolt of Laertes, and up to the poisoning shows no sign. Then Hamlet flings at him a swift and insulting summary of the story with its o'erhasty marriage—a summary that he cannot by any tact ignore. The tension is almost at the breaking point; and the Prince's wild behavior gives him an excuse to retire without exciting the suspicions of the court. Perhaps his self-control was broken for a moment, but, if so, only for a moment. In his immediate "choler," he at least remembered to say nothing that might make Gertrude or anyone else but Hamlet and Horatio the wiser: even in the closet scene, Gertrude still does not suspect his crime; he is much more self-contained than is Macbeth before the ghost of Banquo; and we do not hear of his courtiers' guessing his crime and deserting him, as Macbeth's courtiers do. Claudius is often interpreted as going quite to pieces during the latter part of the play-within-the-play; but it is Hamlet, not he, who interrupts the play and by summarizing the plot makes its continuation needless. Surely, Hamlet would not have done so and risked the disclosure of his own fatal knowledge, if Claudius had given any previous sign. The Prince, moreover, tells Horatio that the King revealed his secret "Upon the talk of the poisoning," that is apparently, at Hamlet's words, "He poisons him i' the garden for his estate." It was not the play then, but Hamlet's sudden outcry that discomposed the King; and he

⁴⁰ Cf. Wilson, *op. cit.*, pp. 144 ff. The text seems to give no support to Wilson's theory that Claudius does not observe the dumbshow. See also W. W. Greg, *M. L. R.*, XXXI, 148.

took advantage of it to escape the unbearable tension of the scene by concealing his guilt in "choler" at the reference to his recent marriage, so that none but Hamlet and Horatio ever guessed that the play had anything more in common with contemporary events than the allusion to the royal wedding.

But the most exacting role that Claudius ever played was at the fencing match; for, as the emotional tension of the tragedy grew more and more severe, it grew harder and harder for Claudius to maintain his part of kingly decorum and benevolence. In this last, all is at stake upon a single throw. No one must know, least of all Gertrude; yet every exigency must be watched for and forestalled. Truly, so many slips were possible: Laertes might repent, as indeed he finally did; the foils might be misplaced, as, in due course, they were; some innocent person might drink the poisoned wine; and Gertrude drank it—Gertrude for whose love Claudius had turned regicide. Throughout the scene, the King must still smile his gracious smile, must still congratulate Hamlet, and unobtrusively never cease still to be watchful, to watch Osric and the foils, to watch the sword-play and the fencers, to watch the poisoned goblet—and still he must be nonchalant and ready in his small talk with the Queen! What an acting part: a sort of stage-director enthroned upon the stage. Gertrude takes up the poisoned wine. This is a terrible moment: without an instant to consider, Claudius must choose between the woman he loves and the throne he occupies. He cries a warning: truly, he loved Gertrude. She is enjoying the match, as any Elizabethan would a display of swordsmanship;⁴¹ she is in festive mood, for her son has returned, and seems in better spirits, and surely all will now go well. Of course, she will "carouse" to his good fortune. She drinks. Now Claudius cannot save her; and, in the lines that follow, he must still seem gay and nonchalant, must still applaud the match—and still watch Gertrude dying of his poison. Polonius, Ophelia, and now Gertrude: his world is falling

⁴¹ See A. S. Wilson, "The Duello in Shakespeare," *Anglia*, to appear.

about him; but he will not despair. Hamlet is scratched: Claudius sees him also marked for death. The rapiers are exchanged; and Laertes too is wounded, and must die. It is enough! Claudius cries out to part the combatants. Hamlet, he knows, will die—and very soon. Thus he can save at least his throne. Then the Queen falls. In her, Laertes sees his own approaching end; and his conscience cries out to be satisfied: he is ready to tell all. But still the King would dominate events: quite cool and marvellously quick of wit, he says that the Queen has only swooned at the sight of blood. Surely the poison will shortly take off Hamlet! The Queen calls a warning to her son, and dies; and Laertes, feeling death steal also through his limbs, tells of the treacherous plot. Claudius has no time. Hamlet comes on him with the poisoned sword, and stabs him. The wound is mortal as Claudius well knows; but still and yet still, he will have fortitude: he cries for help, and tells the courtiers that he is “but hurt.” Though dying, he will still command as King. But Hamlet forces to his lips the poisoned wine, and bids him follow Gertrude, the wife for whom he had slain the Lord’s Anointed, the wife that that regicide had made him finally kill, the wife whose death reveals his plots and brings about his own. It is Greek Nemesis. He drinks and dies.

If Shakespeare’s Macbeth shows moral cowardice, his Claudius has a tenacity of will, a marvellous histrionic power, an almost superhuman self-control. Indeed, Claudius as a king has almost every quality needed for practical government: he can create about him the pomp of royalty; yet, at the same time, he is accessible to information, and he keenly observes with his own eyes and ears; he is a penetrating judge and an adept manipulator of the people that surround him; he is a finished actor, narrow in scope perhaps, but perfect in his part; and, above all, he is absolutely honest with himself, and does not sentimentalize his sin. His effort to win the crown succeeded: his effort to keep it failed; but the failure must not all be imputed to his fault: about the middle of the play, most of his supporters were removed, Rosencrantz

and Guildenstern, Ophelia and Polonius. The Queen was always a dubious ally, and after the closet scene, more so than ever. Claudius must now employ such as the silly Osric and the ardent but unreliable Laertes. Thus the intervening figures have fallen away, and weakened the advantage of Claudius as King, and also weakened the forces of compromise: Gertrude who strove to bring peace between her husband and her son, and Polonius with his cautious moderation. Conciliation is now impossible; and both sides realize it. The King strikes first, and tries to send the Prince to his death in England; but his plan fails, largely because he dared not warn the two ambassadors what their dispatch contained so that they would guard it especially from Hamlet. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern still thought themselves Hamlet's friends; and so the King had to take his chance upon their ignorance; and fortune deserted him. The effort with Laertes, planned and executed with necessary haste, was an even more doubtful chance, and an even greater failure. Thus the current of events forced upon Claudius more and more desperate means; but his astute intelligence and resource still rose to the occasion; and, even at the moment of his death, he still tried to summon his supporters; but Polonius, who should have marshalled them to his aid, had gone beyond his call. Claudius died truly like a king, died fighting; but it was a diplomatic, not a military, struggle—and, perhaps for this reason our less sophisticated sense of politics can hardly comprehend it. He was in the wrong, and so he finally lost; for the Elizabethans had something of the Stoic faith in the ultimate triumph of good and virtue. He lost; but the struggle was prolonged, and he dragged down with him his antagonist.

If Claudius then is such a kingly King, what of his inner character as a man? Do not his actions, so far as his past permitted, show justice, fortitude, and even a considerate benevolence—such virtues as the saintly Hooker required of a monarch?⁴² Indeed, King Claudius, but for his initial crime of regicide and the successive crimes that it unexpectedly en-

⁴² R. Hooker, *Ecclesiastical Polity*, Bk. V, chap. i.

tailed, seems always struggling to be a good man and a worthy sovereign; and he smarts under the "lash" of his conscience. Shakespeare, in fact, has even changed his source to absolve Claudius, as far as possible, of misdeeds. In the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, even before the play-within-the-play warned him of his danger, he gratuitously planned to have Hamlet "removed . . . from life"; but Shakespeare instead has him nominate Hamlet as Crown Prince, and follow to the last possible moment a policy of patient conciliation. In the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, his conscience began to awaken only after the play-within-the-play had made him feel his danger; whereas Shakespeare, earlier in the tragedy, deliberately inserted a soliloquy to show that even then he labored under the "heavy burthen" of his sense of guilt. In the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, without a scruple, he prepared the poisoned drink, not only for Hamlet, but also, in supreme treachery, for Laertes. In short, this Claudius of Shakespeare's source is the melodramatic villain whom some critics insist on seeing in Shakespeare's character, and whom Shakespeare himself, in these three passages, clearly repudiates. The every policy of Claudius is bent, not toward evil and destruction, but toward peace and good, even in the case of Fortinbras, who inaugurated his reign with a rebellion. The plots and final downfall of a mere villain have little tragic pathos: he arouses in the audience no fellow-feeling; for he seems too far removed from the human average. But Claudius is very humanity itself, though magnified to a heroic stature; and his course throughout the play represents man's endless effort to be at once "pardon'd and retain the offence," to make good grow out of evil, and to redeem a great crime by a future life of virtue: Claudius would atone to Hamlet for the murder of his father, by being a father to him and making him Crown Prince; and Gertrude and Polonius shall lose nothing by his crime; but events have passed beyond him: he must plot Hamlet's death to save his own life and throne; and, in compassing Hamlet's death, he indirectly causes the death of Polonius and later of the Queen. Macbeth committed regicide, and

stole a throne, and scourged Scotland as an atrocious tyrant;⁴³ but Claudius, the subtle casuist, commits the crime, but plans that none should pay the penalty; and, for the moment, all goes well: he achieves the throne by legal acclamation; with full approval of the court, he marries his brother's wife; and, in his first scene, he appears ruling with justice and discretion. But his "offense is rank; it smells to heaven"; and heaven will none of it: the Ghost walks; Hamlet learns its message; the play-scene convinces him; and, in the ensuing struggle, the dynasty is wiped out. Whether one call Claudius good or bad depends, as in the case of Iago, on one's ethical rigorism and on one's view of human kind; for, like Iago,⁴⁴ he follows the dictates of his position, age, and character; and, like Macbeth, he is at last swept off his feet by a situation that he made, and so thought he could dominate; but the ways of Providence are past control.

What "humor" governed Claudius is never clearly shown: it cannot be phlegm, for he is not slow and stupid; it cannot be choler, for he is certainly not angry and impatient; his steadfastness of purpose shows that he is not of mercurial cast; and his unhappy youth and evil end belie the sanguine temper. He is hardly old enough to be naturally melancholy; and yet perhaps the conditions of his former and of his present life have aged him prematurely, and carried him to a psychological stage even beyond that of Polonius, who is generally thought his senior; but, if he is melancholy, it is only a mild and repressed form of the malady: perhaps one should rather think of him as being, like Horatio, a happy balance of humorous influence. Indeed, he is too subtle and complex a character to be summed up, like Laertes, in a single clear-cut adjective: he is no obvious type, but a personality full of fine lights and shades and human incongruities, no second-rate, minor character, but the very figure of a protagonist in a great tragedy.

His private character appears most clearly in his prayer-

⁴³ See the present writer, "'Macbeth' as a Compliment to James I," *loc. cit.*

⁴⁴ See the present writer, "'Honest Iago,'" *PMLA*, XLVI, 724 ff.

soliloquy; and, here above all, he shows an honesty with himself and a sense of moral values that are not consonant with total depravity. James I reminds us that a king has also his responsibilities as a Christian:⁴⁵ and Claudius takes his Christian duties seriously: for him there is no "shuffling," no such thing as sentimental excuse of rationalized "equivocation." He admits his "guilt," his "wretched state," and his "bosom black as death." As Sir Richard Baker explains in his commentary on the Thirty-second Psalm, mere self-confession is not enough; it must be accompanied by true repentance;⁴⁶ and, as the Church requires and as Claudius well knew, restitution of the theft was a part of true repentance and was necessary before a valid absolution and heaven's forgiveness could be hoped for. His soul is "struggling to be free"; and yet his sin still holds it. He is the battleground, as the Middle Ages would portray it, and as Marlowe does in *Faustus*, of his good and evil angels: the good in his nature apparent to the world, a loving husband, a charming diplomat, a shrewd and resolute monarch; the evil within himself, a miserable sinner striving for salvation in the face of an honest conviction that he is damned to eternal hell. The Elizabethans believed their Christian concepts; and to them the inner struggle of Claudius had an intense reality. Here, indeed, was a man of astounding fortitude.

This is the subtle personality, on whom editors have foisted the term "bloat," whom critics have called "tame" and "unconvincing"—as if a competent playwright would so conceive his hero's chief opponent! No wonder that, in order to find a struggle in the play, they have had to seek it in Hamlet's supposed inner vacillation, and so made the hero a maundering lunatic. Is Claudius, indeed, a mere melodramatic villain as in the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, a toad, a "gib," a "mildew'd ear"? Truly, "almost everything that has been written about this play is out of focus, for Claudius is either belittled or disregarded." The King in Shakespeare's drama is human-all-

⁴⁵ James I, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

⁴⁶ R. Baker, *Meditations* (London, 1639), pp. 61 ff.

too-human in his sin and in the recompense he pays; and Hamlet's diatribes express, not the true Claudius, but Hamlet's own bitterness—a bitterness all the stronger because Claudius was so very much a king, because he had won the support of court, of nation, and above all of Gertrude. This “satyr” is not the true Claudius any more than Hamlet's slurring of Polonius is the true Chamberlain, or his contempt of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, a true depiction of his boyhood playmates. Was the whole court of Denmark, the court of Hamlet's father, so corrupt as such a minister and such courtiers would imply? Nor was Claudius himself so utterly corrupt. He had sinned, as all humanity sins, from overwhelming motives; but still he was a man, with good as well as evil; and he was a king, with even the magnanimity of a king. He had not, to be sure, the military glamor of his royal predecessor; but his greatness was none the less: under his robes of state, he deftly hides his own fierce inner conflict—that conflict of all mankind who “would not play false and yet would wrongly win”⁴⁷—and, in his outer life, as husband, father, monarch, he directs with astute energy his every word and action to the incompatible service of God and Mammon: others shall lose nothing by his crime, yet he shall be the gainer; his rule shall be both strong and benevolent, yet he shall fulfill his destiny and ruthlessly satisfy his primal moving passions: “My crown, my own ambition, and my queen.”

⁴⁷ *Macbeth*, I, v, 18-19.

CHAPTER X

PRINCE HAMLET AND HIS FELLOW-CHARACTERS

THE FOREGOING chapters have attempted to exhibit against the background of Elizabethan life the words, actions, and personalities of all the characters in *Hamlet* except the title role; and these antecedent studies should serve greatly to illuminate the interpretation of this, the most difficult of all the parts; for an understanding of the tangential figures should at least somewhat plot the boundaries of the dramatist's conception of his hero. A systematic summary, therefore, of each of these characters in its relation to Hamlet seems essential to a criticism of the play and especially to any resolution of the several problems that have troubled scholars in the Prince himself. If one accept the theory of tragedy that defines its essence in terms of conflict, then, unless this conflict be entirely within the mind of a single figure, the various persons who act and react upon each other in the plot must typify so many various aspects of the struggle pro or con, must illustrate various degrees of awareness of the fundamental issues, and, as they know more or less, various predilections or prejudices for one side or the other.

Of course, those critics who maintain that the struggle in *Hamlet* is confined to the hero's own inner sensibilities, and thus make of the drama a mere lyric monologue, with a varying incidental chorus composed of the other characters, have little need to survey these less important roles; and, in fact, they generally ignore them. The play becomes a sort of subjective *Tamburlaine*, in which all but the predominant figure is mere scenery. But the foregoing chapters, if they prove anything, prove that the lesser characters are very much more than this. If one takes this common view, in short, one ignores the lesser roles; and, if one ignores the lesser roles, one has no occasion to realize the inadequacy of this view: thus arises

both the prevalence of the view and the neglect of the minor characters, who are surveyed, if at all, only casually and through the eyes of the Prince: Ophelia becomes merely the girl he loves, and she ceases in effect to be the daughter of Polonius, the sister of Laertes, or a subject of the King and Queen; and critics sometimes even scold her for not forsaking her father and her King to help Hamlet in a conspiracy about which she has no knowledge whatsoever. Gertrude becomes Hamlet's mother and nothing more; she ceases to be a wife, or even a queen. Strangest of all to an Elizabethan, Claudius is not thought of as a king, but merely as Hamlet's antagonist, the heavy villain of the piece. The characters, moreover, are interpreted purely as Hamlet sees them: Polonius as a fool; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as knaves; and the King as both knave and fool, and even as physically disgusting. The play, indeed, becomes a Romantic fantasy of fools, knaves, and madmen: could such a parody on life have greater truth or seriousness than melodrama? The foregoing chapters have attempted to reassert the verisimilitude of the minor roles in terms of Elizabethan thought and life: as a result, they bring out interpretations that sometimes differ sharply from the widely accepted views: what light do these changes in the minor characters throw on the character of Hamlet?

In the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, the relations between the characters are too crudely portrayed to be highly significant. As one would expect in a poorly written or a mangled text, the more obvious emotions and motives take all the space to the exclusion of the finer touches. The hatreds of the story, of Hamlet for the King, and of the King for Hamlet, are rather overemphasized: indeed, the King hates Hamlet and plans his death before he has any definite motive beyond his own villainy. On the other hand, the affection between Hamlet and Ophelia and between Hamlet and his mother, though alluded to,¹ is never really dramatized: there is no poignant lovers' quarrel; nor does Gertrude endeavor, with the pathos of the impossible, to reconcile her second husband and her

¹ *Bestrafte Brudermord*, II, iii, and I, vii.

son. The King, likewise, tells Gertrude how deeply he loves her,² and calls her "My dearest consort";³ but he shows nothing of the dignified affection that Shakespeare's Claudius bears towards his Queen. If this is the case among the major figures, such minor characters as appear in the *Bestrafte Brudermord* are even more lightly sketched and conventionally placed in relation to the Prince. The niceties then of these relationships between Hamlet and his friends, his enemies, and those whose part is too minor to enter directly into his great conflict, are almost entirely of Shakespeare's own conceiving, and, therefore, should repay at least a rapid study.

Perhaps the most fundamental aspect of this problem is the connection between Hamlet and the lesser characters; for this shows his normal attitude toward people, and illustrates his manners and actions when they are not warped from the normal by the special conditions of the play, his father's sudden death, his mother's unexpected marriage, and, above all, the dreadful revelation of the Ghost. To this class of relationships belong the soldiers and Horatio in Act I, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern when they first arrive, the company of players, Fortinbras and his captain, and the clownish grave-diggers. In every act, Shakespeare supplies two or three such personages, generally a deliberate addition to his sources, in order to keep always before his audience the normal processes of life and the normal character of the Prince; for, without a constant contact with the norm, we should lose our sense of the Prince's basic personality, and we should enter so into the land of the extraordinary that, as in melodrama, we should lose all realization that it was extraordinary, and the play would lose all connection with real life. What then is the norm of Hamlet's relationship with the soldiers, courtiers, players, and peasants with whom he has occasional contact?

Hamlet's relations, in the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, with the soldiers in Act I, seems to be on a purely formal plane. He is "your highness"; and, except for Horatio, who is a soldier in this version of the story, they soon lapse inarticulate into

² *Ibid.*, II, i.

³ *Ibid.*, II, viii.

the background. In Shakespeare, these relations are skilfully portrayed: Hamlet treats them with an easy courtesy that would consort with Claudius' "chiefest courtier" and with Ophelia's ideal prince; and they respond with a soldierly respect, keeping silent except when they are questioned, but speaking and acting boldly when they think that the Prince's life is in danger from the Ghost. Unlike Horatio, Marcellus does not ask Hamlet to reveal the message of the apparition; and, as a good soldier should, he obeys, and without question takes the oath of secrecy. The attitude of Marcellus and Bernardo would seem to imply a Hamlet courteous and charming and worthy of respect. Horatio has the skeptical mind of a true scholar; and his interest in the Ghost is doubtless more than idle curiosity; but Hamlet evades his questions, and begs him to take no "offence." At the end of the scene, as the others pause for the Prince to precede them as his rank requires, he treats them as his equals with the finest courtesy, and says: "Nay, come, let's go together." The Horatio of the later acts is Hamlet's intimate and confidant, and hardly belongs among the minor characters who have no direct part in the struggle with the King.

The initial scene with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern again shows Hamlet as something of his former self: again, he is most gracious in his turn of phrase, but on a more intimate plane. He greets them as "Good lads"; and they joke together and gossip about things at Elsinore and Wittenberg. To be sure, he declares that "Denmark's a prison," that he "cannot reason," and that the world seems a "foul and pestilent congregation of vapours"; but, on the whole, the talk is almost frivolous, except for the passage in which he conjures them by their love for him to say why they came to Elsinore. The talk of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern takes for granted a gay and genial Hamlet; and, if such conversation between them had been unaccustomed, he surely would have resented their witty intimacy. It implies a Hamlet who cared for plays and the amusements of the town; and the scene leads on to the advent of the actors. Here again, Hamlet treats his

social inferiors with his customary tact and courtesy: he greets them as "masters" of their profession, and addresses the chief player as "my old friend," and even uses "thee" and "thou," surely implying intimacy rather than mere difference in social status. His talk is clever and redolent of feasting and falconry; and he enthusiastically commands a speech at once. As the actors take their leave, he again shows princely courtesy by urging Polonius to give them the best of entertainment. This is the Hamlet of the green room at Wittenberg, the Hamlet of his noble intimates with whom he has been brought up, and it shows neither the *gaucherie* with which he treats Polonius and the King nor the melancholy with which some critics believe him to have been afflicted so intensely.

This princely courtesy and charm, of which Ophelia speaks, appear regularly in his casual relationships. Indeed, he is so much a prince that the very pirates who capture him recognize his royal status and trust in his word to get them pardon. He treats the Captain of Fortinbras with the same courtesy and receives from him the same respect as appear in his relations with Marcellus and Bernardo. For Fortinbras himself, he has supreme regard: the Polish campaign, fought purely in the cause of honor, seems to him the essence of chivalric enterprise; and, at the conclusion of the play, he casts his vote for Fortinbras as the fittest monarch of the "war-like state" of Denmark. Fortinbras, indeed, lives by the martial tradition and ideals of the Elder Hamlet; and the Younger Hamlet, admiring his own father, also admires him.

Hamlet's relations with the gravediggers suggest his attitude toward the peasantry. To the Renaissance, the lower agrarian classes were little more than serfs; and Hamlet treats them as one might expect. He addresses one as "Sirrah"; and, though they do not know him, they use "sir" in accordance with his dress and bearing. Again his sharp, dry wit comes into play; but, unlike the courtiers and Polonius, they do not grant him the royal privilege of getting the best of all the repartee; and Hamlet is somewhat naïvely surprised that they can answer him so well. His joking is less merry than the first

talk with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; for he has learned much since then, and is no longer as blithe and carefree.

The Ghost should be termed perhaps an ally of Hamlet, perhaps a neutral in the struggle it precipitates. It gives its message, exacts the oath of silence, and departs, until, after a lapse of weeks, it reappears to accuse Hamlet of neglecting his sacred mission. As a matter of fact, Hamlet's purpose is by no means "blunted": he has, indeed, just killed Polonius out of hand, mistaking him for the King; but Elizabethan ghosts were not supposed to be omniscient, and could not see into the motives and the workings of the human mind.⁴ Hamlet's attitude toward the Ghost at the first was a very Elizabethan doubt as to its really being the spirit that it seemed. He was most unwilling to believe that his father's soul was not in heaven; and he shrank from damning his own soul by unwarranted regicide. He looks for proof, and at last the players supply it: surely indeed, a mordant irony that the Ghost should return to chide him at the very moment that he is most determined to avenge it! To him, his father was the embodiment of all the heroic virtues: this was his ideal of manhood; and this ideal does not suggest a weak, over-sensitive, vacillating Hamlet.

Horatio is Hamlet's only real ally; and Hamlet's relations with Horatio begin with a somewhat aloof courtesy that ripens into friendship. Horatio can do little; but is loyal to the point of frankly telling Hamlet that he will probably lose the fencing match; and such an unflattering comment implies sincere attachment. He never puts himself forward; and, in Hamlet's presence, does not indulge in long lectures, such as he gave Marcellus and Bernardo. Like Ophelia, he sees in Hamlet a "sweet Prince," a truly "noble heart"; and, as Hamlet dies, he utters a brief but fervent prayer in which for the first time he addresses his great patron in terms of "thee" and "thy." Hamlet, on his side, shows in the ripening of his friendship with Horatio, a deepening sense of values: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were the comrades of his years of relaxation;

⁴ See W. C. Curry, "The Demonic Metaphysics of *Macbeth*," *S. P.*, XXX, 414 ff.

Horatio is the loyal friend and ally in time of dire need. Horatio's is a deeply personal and single-minded fidelity, with no extraneous motives of possible court advancement: would Horatio have staked his all to follow a mere lunatic, or a will-less visionary? Surely, he saw in Hamlet something more than this.

Whether Queen Gertrude should be regarded as Hamlet's enemy, or his ally, or as a figure quite indifferent in the struggle, is not easy to decide. Her marriage to Claudius seemed to her son an act of treachery against himself; and, throughout the play, she shows a somewhat divided allegiance, but inclining more and more toward Hamlet. Her attachment to her husband seems to have been chiefly a matter of dynastic policy; her attachment to Hamlet was a deep maternal love; and Claudius rightly declared that she "Lives almost by his looks." Surely she would have given him the crown, had conditions permitted it. That he loves her seems almost equally clear: in the first act, he stays at Elsinore to please her; as the Ghost's revelation seems to implicate her in the murder, he turns bitterly against her, and puts into the mouth of the Player-Queen the words, "None wed the second but who killed the first"; perhaps her obvious surprise at his later reference to "kill a king" made him realize that she knew nothing of the murder. At all events, he ceases to accuse her of it in all the diatribe that follows. She does not try to explain to him the reasons of state that compelled her to the marriage; for then she must point out to Hamlet his own youthful inability to cope with the imminent crisis. Their relations, like those of Hamlet and Ophelia, are governed by the dramatic irony of mutual misunderstanding: it is a lovers' quarrel; and their very love for each other makes the pain of both the keener. She is so deeply hurt by the sin of incest and by her son's vitriolic words that she can only bow before the storm and humbly ask what he would have her do. The relations of this son and mother form perhaps the deepest pathos of the play. With her dying breath, she turns against the husband whom the critics say she loved, to warn her "dear Hamlet" not to drink the poisoned wine.

Is this a Gertrude infatuated with Claudius? And if she were so infatuated, why need the two have married in an age of royal mistresses and paramours, unless, as in the case of Henry VIII, reasons of state required it? Indeed, her love of Hamlet, not of Claudius, actuates her almost every action: her marriage to save Denmark; her insistence that her son remain at court; her efforts to find the causes of his madness and so to cure it; her deception of Claudius as to the true nature of the closet scene; and finally this warning as she dies. Claudius, with true insight into her motives, reads her aright, when, with perhaps a touch of jealousy, he told Laertes that she "Lives almost by his looks."

Hamlet's only actual enemies in the play are Claudius and Laertes, and these only in the latter acts; but he attributes a like enmity also to Polonius, to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and apparently even to Ophelia. All of them bend their efforts to find the causes of his malady; and all of them, therefore, arouse his suspicion as spies of Claudius. Polonius had been his father's minister; but Hamlet is impatient of diplomacy and of diplomats, and looks on Polonius with an unmerited contempt. He does not quite hate him, and regrets killing him, perhaps because he is the father of Ophelia, or perhaps merely because his death will bring political complications. Polonius, on his side, takes the Prince's biting wit with a self-controlled and almost benevolent reserve, though Hamlet lets no occasion slip to show the world how little he thinks of this one-time counsellor of his father. Apparently, the diplomatic type of courtier, for whom the Renaissance was making way, found little favor in the Prince's eyes; and Polonius, as a good example of it, found none at all.

Hamlet would seem to have loved Ophelia deeply; and, when she appears to lend herself to Claudius as a spy, her lover upbraids her with something of the bitterness he shows towards Gertrude. In his love letter, he had called her "thou"; but, when he begins to suspect her, he turns to the more formal pronoun: "Where's your father?" She tells a patent lie, and probably tells it badly. She does it for his sake; but

he does not think of that, and immediately believes that she has betrayed him. He bitterly declares that he loved her "once," and urges her to enter a nunnery, one suspects, because he is jealous lest she marry someone else; and later he is jealous of her brother's love and grief. The last he sees of her is apparently at the play: he is sent to England before their mutual misunderstandings can be explained to one another; and before he returns, she dies.

Hamlet's feelings toward Laertes seem to be divided: early in the play, the two were not apparently close friends: they go to different universities; they show no reaction toward each other in the initial scene at court; and Laertes does not know Hamlet well enough to realize that his advances to Ophelia are sincere. Later in the play, the King, apparently upon his own bare word, convinces Laertes that Hamlet slew his father; Laertes is very willing to take up Hamlet's challenge in his sister's grave; and he will stoop to the lowest treachery to avenge himself on his Prince. Laertes, in short, was never Hamlet's friend. Hamlet, on the other hand, as Claudius says, is by nature of a temperament, "Most generous and free from all contriving"; and, though the Prince was disgusted at the "bravery" of Laertes' grief, yet he describes Laertes as "a very noble youth," and declares he loved him "ever." He regrets the unseemly quarrel at Ophelia's grave, and tries to patch up a peace as best he can. The princely magnanimity of Hamlet shows nowhere better than in his relations with Laertes; but, at the same time, he shows great naïveté of judgment; for his own feelings should have taught him that the choleric Laertes would hardly forgive him off-hand for the killing of Polonius.

This naïveté of judgment concerning the motives of those around him, is evident also in his failure to understand even his comrades, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. An older, more sophisticated prince, ready to assume the responsibilities of rule, might well have guessed the benevolence of their reasons in trying to probe his lunacy. Instead, he jumps to the conclusion that the King has bribed them by court favors to

play the spy upon him. He never forgives them, and sends even the merry Rosencrantz to his death without "shriving-time allow'd," a terrible punishment, to judge by the Elder Hamlet. Their whole part in the plot is a study in dramatic irony: they never glimpse the motives of either Claudius or Hamlet; they know neither the true reason why the King recalled them from Wittenberg, nor why Hamlet grows cold to them, nor why they are sent to England, nor why, on coming there, they should be executed. For all they knew, their every act was a service both to Hamlet and the King; and yet Hamlet drew apart from them more and more until the gamesome Rosencrantz, with something akin to pathos, reminded him: "My lord, you once did love me." But despite this growing coldness, their fidelity to both King and Prince does not diminish; and they accept their fatal errand with a willingness born probably of loyalty to the dynasty but imputed by Hamlet to motives of self-seeking.⁵ One can understand why Hamlet looked upon them as he did: he had perhaps counted on them as allies; and, when he realized that they had returned to Denmark at Claudius' behest, his disappointment doubtless made him all the more suspicious.

Hamlet's attitude toward Osric can readily be dismissed: the Prince will not pay even the compliment of courtesy to foolish affectation; and, moreover, Osric is a courtier of his uncle. Osric, on his side, is abashed at Hamlet's ill-reception of his fine airs and graces. Perhaps Hamlet's disillusion has made him especially appreciate genuineness of word and manner: at least, his praise of Horatio at the beginning of the third act would seem to show as much; and the obvious insincerity of Osric arouses in his mind the same reaction as the apparent duplicity of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

King Claudius is of course the chief antagonist of Hamlet. Claudius, unlike Hamlet, is an experienced statesman and a realist both in politics and in life. He sees Hamlet as Hamlet naturally is, "Most generous and free from all contriving"; and he tries to take advantage of this outspoken nature to

⁵ *Hamlet*, IV, ii, 11 ff.; and V, ii, 57.

entrap the Prince into revealing to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern or to Ophelia the cause of his pretended madness; and, when Hamlet fails to give any satisfactory account of himself, the King's suspicions are so much aroused that, even before the crucial player-scene, he determines upon sending him to England. In the last act, he uses Hamlet's youthful pride as a fencer to lure him to his death. Claudius, in short, understands Hamlet's character and is even more successful than Polonius in judging his insanity. In the early part of the play, he seems to be benevolent in his intentions: he has everything to gain from conciliation; and the Queen would accept no other policy. Probably part of his "choler" after witnessing *The Murder of Gonzago* arose from his chagrin at the obvious failure of this policy; and, during the second half of the tragedy, he is obliged to treat Hamlet as an inveterate enemy and so destroy him. Both of these strategic plans are prudently conceived and skilfully executed. Up to the very end, Claudius still maintains the offensive, except for the player-scene; and, though he had not the advantage of a supernatural source of information, he seems to understand the situation better than his adversary: indeed, he is a kind of *deus ex machina* of the tragedy; and the other characters move across the stage largely at his behest. He does not even need to bring on them the pressure of his royal power, but rather, like a consummate statesman, makes them do his will from their own private motives.

As compared to this acumen and skill, Hamlet's part in the intrigue shows the inexperience of youth: he neither understands, nor tries to understand, the feelings or motives of those about him; and he makes the fatal error of underestimating the abilities of his opponents. He does not stop to realize why his mother married, or why Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and Ophelia are probing into his secret. He does not realize that the early overtures of Claudius have at least political sincerity. He gives no credit to the long-suffering forbearance of Polonius. Indeed, in practical statesmanship, he seems but little more sophisticated than Ophelia. He

takes as his ally Horatio, a scholar of neither wealth nor influence; and he looks on all the others, not only as knaves but fools. He is not experienced enough even to know his enemies from his friends: he takes Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Ophelia, and for a time Gertrude, as his enemies; and he innocently supposes that Laertes, who at first suspects and later hates him, will readily forgive his accidental killing of Polonius. Such an attitude suggests, above all, immaturity of judgment and ignorance of human nature. Fortunately for himself, however, he has sufficient caution to foil the early efforts of Claudius to probe his secret; and he employs the old device,⁶ of insanity to escape question and possible punishment. Late in Act V, he begins to show some insight into character when he regrets his violence at Ophelia's grave, and recognizes that Laertes has reason to be angry with him:

But I am very sorry, good Horatio,
That to Laertes I forgot myself;
For, by the image of my cause, I see
The portraiture of his: I'll court his favours. . . .

In short, he is beginning to make allowances for others' points of view. In general, however, he is by nature a soldier rather than a diplomat; and, for such as Claudius and his minister, he has only misunderstanding and contempt. Perhaps Shakespeare sympathized with his fall as the great dramatist in *Timon* sympathized with the decay of the feudal gentry. The struggle between Hamlet and Claudius took place on a diplomatic plane where the Prince had little experience or aptitude; and Horatio, though loyal, could give him little help.

Hamlet, then, in relation to the other characters, seems to display a group of traits that remind one of Henry V, the ideal King of Shakespeare and of England during the Armada period. He normally shows tact and courtesy toward soldiers, a type that he respects; but courtiers and politicians, like Osric and Guildenstern, can easily arouse his bitter condemnation. He is naturally witty and good-humored, a merry fellow like

⁶In 1541, Henry VIII passed a statute to prevent the feigning of lunacy by traitors. See D. Pickering, *Statutes at Large* (Cambridge, 1763), V, 103 ff.

Rosencrantz, an expert fencer, an habitué of the theater. He falls in love with Ophelia thoughtlessly, and cannot understand why she should suddenly grow chary of his favors. The poor scholar, Horatio, had formerly meant nothing to him; but, as the intrigue closes in around him, he comes to prize Horatio's loyalty, and to disprize his former gay associates. His disillusion at his mother's marriage had been great; and now he thinks the worst of every one: he is struggling toward truer human values; and he discards all former values. The simple, military standards of life will no longer do; and he gropes toward a more complex understanding.

CHAPTER XI

THE HAMLET OF THE CRITICS

ALTHOUGH THE preceding chapters on the minor and sub-major roles in *Hamlet* have briefly indicated the usual attitudes of critics toward each character, a survey also of the more comprehensive theories of the play and especially of the Prince himself seems unavoidable. According to most critics, the crucial question in the tragedy is the reason for Hamlet's delay in avenging his father's murder; and consequently, this is the logical starting-place for any summary of the interpretations. Of course, one may, like Professor Stoll, impute this delay merely to conventional dramatic necessity; for, if Hamlet had killed the King at once, there would have been no play; but, on the other hand, if mere convention governs such a major matter of the tragedy, then, by definition, we have not tragedy but melodrama; for the very essence of tragedy is adequacy of motivation in the main course of the plot. Surely, indeed, one should hesitate to brand as a mere melodrama the most famous play in English literature, until all other possibilities have been tried and failed. In this same class also belongs such criticism as that of Mr. Lewis and Mr. Bradby, who find no logic in the piece: according to their theories, the plot, which reasons of popular appeal would not allow Shakespeare to change from the well-known play of Kyd, is in violent conflict with the character of the Prince, which is Shakespeare's own conception.¹ Most critics, however, have refused such counsels of despair, and have preferred to search for reasons why Hamlet did not act more quickly. The great majority of these find reasons in the subjective condition of his mind. This subjective school of interpretation has many

¹On these views, see E. E. Stoll, *Hamlet* (Minneapolis, 1919); C. M. Lewis, *The Genesis of Hamlet* (New York, 1907); G. F. Bradby, *The Problem of Hamlet* (London, 1928), pp. 191 ff.; and A. J. A. Waldock, *Hamlet* (Cambridge, 1931), pp. 30 ff.

variants; but they fall into a few well differentiated groups, represented at the present time especially in the theories of Professor Bradley and Sir E. K. Chambers.

This subjective theory of *Hamlet* took its rise, as Professor Bradley remarks, in the writings of the sentimental novelist Henry Mackenzie late in the eighteenth century; and it was especially developed in the Romantic criticism of the following generation, a generation that itself excelled in subjective lyricism. If this interpretation of *Hamlet* were truly Elizabethan in its point of view, one wonders why it did not at all survive as a tradition in the writings of earlier Shakespeare critics; and, if it belonged to Shakespeare rather than to the Romantic movement, why did it happen to be discovered at this particular time? Indeed, both Professor Bradley and Sir E. K. Chambers somewhat naïvely suggest that it was not "perceived even in his [Shakespeare's] own day,"²² and that it "belongs essentially not to his age but to our own."²³ Surely such an admission at the outset should give pause to any critic who is seeking, not for the Romantic Hamlet, or for Professor Bradley's or Sir Edmund's Hamlet, but for the Hamlet of William Shakespeare. It necessarily implies either that theirs is not Shakespeare's Hamlet; or that the Elizabethans quite misunderstood a popular tragedy by the most popular playwright of their age; and, if they so utterly misunderstood the play, then Shakespeare, either through incapacity or for some unimaginable reason, did not make it clear to them. In short, these statements are in effect admissions that their interpretations are not Shakespeare's and so have no critical validity.

Perhaps, however, the theories themselves are truer than their supporters would seem to say; and a review, on its own merits, of the subjective interpretation of the play is surely not amiss. Professor Bradley himself has marshalled the most obvious objections against the earlier forms of this point of

²² A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (New York, 1926), p. 92.

²³ E. K. Chambers (ed.), *Hamlet* (New York, 1917), p. xiv. Cf. W. F. Trench, *Shakespeare's Hamlet* (London, 1913), p. 115, who suggests that "even Shakespeare perhaps found it hard to understand" Hamlet!

view, as set forth by Coleridge, Hazlitt, and their followers. (1) That Hamlet's conscience restrained him because he thought revenge a sin is highly improbable: the Elizabethans considered revenge under such circumstances a sacred duty;⁴ Hamlet never mentions it in any other way; and the one occasion when he declares that his "conscience" approves the deed is in the final scene, too late to explain to the audience his previous delay. (2) That he was by nature so weak of nerve and will as to be incapable of action is not borne out by his fight with the pirates, by his killing of Polonius and Laertes, and by his treatment of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern on the way to England; and, besides, this would make of him a sentimental weakling, impossible as a hero, especially to Elizabethan eyes. (3) That he was too much of a philosopher—too deeply involved in intricacies of thought—to be capable of action, was the most widely accepted view in 1904 when Professor Bradley first brought out his lectures, and still appears in Sir E. K. Chambers's recent edition of the play. Indeed, even lately, Hamlet has been compared to no less thinker than Spinoza.⁵ But Hamlet is not by innate character incapable of action; and, though he talks about life, death, friendship, and other topics of eternal human interest, he seems to set forth no clear-cut philosophic system, even to the degree that the cynic Apemantus does in Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*. Professor Bradley notes, moreover, that the interpretation as a prince-philosopher would make Hamlet an impossible tragic hero; and the Elizabethans would certainly not have thought of such a cloistered figure as "The glass of fashion and the mould of form." Since this theory, however, is still prevalent, and since Professor Bradley, *sua consuetudine*, merely asserts this objection without citing contemporary proof, a survey of the Elizabethan attitude toward the prince-philosopher is perhaps appropriate.

⁴ See Lily Campbell, "Theories of Revenge in Renaissance England," *M. P.*, XXVIII, 281 ff.; J. H. Hanford, "Suicide in the Plays of Shakespeare," *PMLA*, XXVII, 380 ff.; and F. T. Bowers, "The Audience and the Revenger of Elizabethan Tragedy," *S. P.*, XXII, 160 ff.

⁵ H. Türck, "Der Totenschädel in Hamlets Hand," *Shak. Jhrb.* (1925), pp. 82-83.

During the Middle Ages, learning, the fruit of the *vita contemplativa*, had been the prerogative of the clergy, especially the monks; and war and government, the prerogative of the knight, the noble, and the king: learning, indeed, was thought to make one effeminate and unfit for manly exercises. Although the Humanists had hailed the accession of Henry VIII, the prince-philosopher, yet this antinomy persisted in general opinion throughout the sixteenth century; and Elyot had occasion to inveigh against the "pestiferous opinion that gret lerned men be unapt to the ministration of things of waightly importance."⁶ With the dissolution of the monasteries and the subsequent decline of education,⁷ the need of the government for competent experts and administrators became acute;⁸ and, with the introduction of artillery in the 1590's, even soldiers had to study mathematics. The influence also of Renaissance Italy and of the classics made for a higher estimation of learning, and it was considered more and more an "ornament,"⁹ though not an essential, of nobility. Even so, however, the old opinion persisted; and, in 1578, the author of *Cyuite and Vncyuite Life* seems to differentiate learning and arms as separate professions for "Gentlemen."¹⁰ The former was still felt to unfit a man for the "practical side of life";¹¹ and, to offset this danger, its apologists recommended useful subjects,¹² such as English composition and history,¹³ and especially instruction through experience and travel rather than through books. This opinion was enforced, moreover, by the notorious example of Rudolph II who neglected the affairs of the Holy Roman Empire to give his time to natural philosophy. King James I, therefore, in the *Basilikon Doron*, written especially to instruct his son in the art of kingship, although he

⁶ Elyot, *Governour*, Bk. I, sec. xii.

⁷ R. H. Benson, *C. H. E. L.*, III, 54 ff.

⁸ Ruth Kelso, *The English Gentleman of the Sixteenth Century* (Urbana, Ill., 1929), pp. 111 ff.

⁹ J. B. Nenne, *Nennio*, tr. W. Jones (London, 1595), p. 18.

¹⁰ *Cyuite and Vncyuite Life* (Rox. Lib., London, 1868), p. 91.

¹¹ R. V. Lindabury, *Patriotism in Elizabethan Drama* (Princeton, [1930]), pp. 32 ff.

¹² Kelso, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

¹³ Henry Peacham, the Elder, *Garden of Eloquence* (London, 1577), A ii.

himself was somewhat of a scholar, warned the Prince to give to reading and study only "idle houres . . . not interrupting therewith the discharge of your office";¹⁴ George More declared that it was "not good that a Prince should be too great a scholar";¹⁵ and the ideal monarch of popular conception was Henry V, who certainly had not given his youth to studious pursuits.

Shakespeare reflects this attitude; and, indeed, a successful Elizabethan playwright could hardly gainsay the prejudices of his audience. The general term for learning was "philosophy"; and, in all Shakespeare's extensive gallery of rulers and great nobles, very few of the princes are philosophers; and, when they are, philosophy appears as useless or even detrimental to their rule. In *Love's Labour's*, the King makes his court "a little Academe," and renounces the society of women, for the celibate life was still felt to be appropriate to learning. His "good sentences," however, like those of Nerissa to her mistress, are not "well followed"; for affairs of state, in the person of the very personable Princess of France, intrude upon the "little Academe"; and the regimen of cloistered study evaporates ridiculously in love-making: *Love's Labour's Lost* depicts the philosophic life as impractical and rather silly, perhaps because such a scheme still had about it the bad odor of despised monasticism. In the plays that immediately follow, although there are occasional sententious passages, such as Theseus' slurring description of convent-life in the *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and the famous passage on "The lunatic, the lover and the poet," yet most of Shakespeare's princes are more concerned with strenuous action to meet the situation then before them than with the general truths of life. Henry IV, to be sure, as he weakens toward his death, grows something philosophical; and the amorous Duke in *Twelfth Night* is sententious upon love and music; but Richard II, even fallen on evil days, does not use philosophy for consolation. The banished Duke in *As You Like It* is introduced

¹⁴ James I, *Political Works*, ed. McIlwain (Cambridge, Mass., 1918), p. 38.

¹⁵ G. More, *Principles for Young Princes* (London, 1611), chap. ix.

philosophizing about the advantages of Arcadian felicity over court-life; but he quickly returns to active rule when the opportunity arrives. The Duke of Vienna in *Measure for Measure* apparently thinks himself adept at the "science" of government; and, like a scholar, he has sought retirement from the vulgar gaze; indeed, he has so much "loved the life removed" that he has neglected the due enforcing of the law; and he himself admits this "fault." He is forever generalizing, moreover, on abstract subjects, on life and death, on beauty and goodness, on calumny, on novelty, on false report. Thus he seems to be something of a scholar; and his method of civil reform is not only ineffectual but positively injurious. The clearest and most conclusive case perhaps of the prince-philosopher in Shakespeare's plays is Prospero in *The Tempest*: when he ruled Milan, he was reputed "for liberal arts Without a parallel"; his "library Was dukedom large enough"; and, for this reason, he neglected the government, and "cast" it on his wicked brother. The consequence was his overthrow, and almost the loss of his life and his daughter's. Even on the island, he refers to "volumes . . . that I prize above my dukedom"; he boasts of his teaching of Miranda; and he delivers what is perhaps the most famous gnomonic speech in Shakespeare "We are such stuff as dreams are made of. . . ." But the usurpation of his brother has taught him more of politics than did the printed page; and, when he returns to his dukedom, though "Every third thought" shall be of the grave, yet he rejoices to take up the government; and, apparently with this in mind, he discards his magic staff and books: upon this second accession to the crown, he will not only reign but rule. Here indeed, even at the very end of the dramatist's career, is a clear expression of the antagonism between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*; and Shakespeare regularly pictures the former as the more significant, the more admirable and the more conducive to success. Should we add *Hamlet* to this group of plays that picture this antagonism; was it too much learning that shattered Hamlet's political career, as it did that of the dukes in *The*

Tempest, in *Measure for Measure*, and perhaps in *As You Like It*?

Shakespeare regards philosophy not only with disfavor but even with derision and contempt. He regularly uses the words, *philosopher*, *philosophy*, and *philosophical*, with slurring irony or at least with a mock-serious jocularity. Friar Lawrence tries to console Romeo for his banishment by "philosophy"; and Romeo replies, "Yet banished? Hang up philosophy!" Lucentio goes to Padua, "nursery of arts," to learn the application, as he says, of "that part of philosophy . . . that treats of happiness"—and he proceeds to enjoy himself. The crazy Lear refers to Edgar, who impersonates a madman, as "this philosopher"; Edgar's philosophical "study" is "How to prevent the fiend, and to kill vermin"; and Lear himself, as he grows more and more insane, increasingly indulges in generalities on human life. Even in his later years, Shakespeare did not relent; and, bitterest of all, a "philosopher" in *Timon* is compared to a "whoremaster." Not only philosophy as a concept, but also Shakespeare's one professional philosopher, the "churlish" Apemantus, are certainly not depicted with respect; indeed, his constant railing suggests the fool Thersites in *Troilus and Cressida*. Did Shakespeare conceive Hamlet in this category?

For more than a century Hamlet has been called a prince-philosopher; and his spiritual refinement and intellectual interests have been blamed for his delay in carrying out the revenge dictated by the Ghost. In Elizabethan eyes, philosophy was, to be sure, a reasonable cause for just such a serious defect; and, in very much this way, Shakespeare seems to use it in *Measure for Measure* and *The Tempest*; but is Hamlet a philosopher, even in the somewhat wide Elizabethan sense, unless one extend the definition to include everyone who gives lyric expression to feelings common to all mankind? And is lyric expression *philosophy*? If a truculent Elizabethan audience, moreover, had seen in Hamlet only an incompetent dreamer, could he possibly be the hero of a play that ran through so many quartos? Could this popular hero be de-

picted in such fashion as to risk the amused contempt of the Elizabethan public?

As a matter of fact, there is very little of either the philosopher or even the student about Shakespeare's Prince of Denmark. Ophelia, who knew him well, informs the audience in a soliloquy that he is "The glass of fashion and the mould of form" of that war-like court. He has, to be sure, "The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword"; but "scholar" may refer to nothing more than his studentship at Wittenberg; and such a status as some of us know too well, may have only the most casual connections with philosophy and learning. Indeed, his student days were quite obviously given rather to the "tongue" and to the "sword": he is a clever talker; with his college cronies, the gay Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he shares a deep interest in the theater; and he is a better fencer, even than Laertes. The studious Horatio, on the other hand, he knew so slightly at the university that on first seeing him in the play, Hamlet is doubtful of his name and calls him *you*, not *thee* and *thou*, as he calls Rosencrantz and Guildenstern at first. The Prince shows no philosophic calm, but in his soliloquies chafes under the uncertainty of the earlier acts; and also at Ophelia's grave, he certainly shows nothing of philosophical restraint, nor even of prudence or decorum. Twice early in the play, moreover, he casts typical Shakespearean slurs at "philosophy" as inadequate and useless in explaining the facts of life: when the appearance of the Ghost overwhelms the skeptical Horatio as "wondrous strange," Hamlet, with a sardonic touch, remarks:

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

Later in his comment on the fickleness of courtiers, he turns aside again to note the limitations of "philosophy": "Sblood, there is something in this more than natural, if philosophy could find it out." These slurs do not represent, as do Prospero's renunciation of his books and staff, a change of heart from love of learning to love of life: the first one occurs be-

fore the events of the play can have wrought deeply on his character, and they seem to represent his habitual previous opinion—an opinion natural to the companion of the merry Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Hamlet, in short, though very much a prince, is in no sense a philosopher; and, though Shakespeare might have motivated his delay by representing him as too studious, the dramatist in actual fact did not do so; and, had he done so, Hamlet would have been a far less appealing figure to the Elizabethan audience.

Today Hamlet the prince-philosopher has largely given place to Professor Bradley's Hamlet, the sufferer from melancholy occasioned by sudden nervous shock. Professor Bradley's lectures have gone through more than a score of new impressions during the last thirty years, and are so widely quoted in handbooks and editions that a survey of *Hamlet* criticism can hardly leave them out. Professor Bradley does not believe that Hamlet was by nature too high-strung or too intellectual to act: though he had something perhaps of both these tendencies, the essential cause of his delay is an unwonted and morbid melancholy induced by the sudden and shocking knowledge of his mother's incestuous marriage and especially of her adultery during the lifetime of the former King to which the Ghost is supposed to make allusion. Of course the present writer, for reasons already set forth in the chapter on Queen Gertrude, does not believe that any such adultery occurred; but, even waiving this debated question, the theory of Professor Bradley does not seem satisfactory. If this were the major cause of Hamlet's melancholy and his want of action, why is one of his longest and bitterest soliloquies, directed especially against the Queen, placed at the end of the second scene before he knows anything of this supposed adultery? Hamlet, furthermore, must indeed have been not only a sensitive but also a very naïve young man to have lived in a Renaissance court long enough to become the ideal courtier that Ophelia says he is, and yet be so horrified at the very existence of this sort of an *affaire*; and, to make matters worse, the proponents of the subjective theory stress

the fact that this court in particular was evil and "corrupt." This interpretation seems, therefore, to involve one both in difficulties with the text and in something of a self-contradiction between Hamlet's courtly background and supposed lack of sophistication.

This is not, however, the only, or the most serious, contradiction inherent in the theory. Whether one consider Hamlet's melancholy chronic, as do the earlier critics and Sir E. K. Chambers, or the result of recent shock, as do Professor Bradley and his followers, it must have been, according to their theory, so overwhelming as to cause paralysis of will in an all-absorbing action to which the sufferer was prompted, not only by his deep love for his father but also, as he says, "by heaven and hell." This must indeed be a serious mental illness that would so utterly inhibit action that a young man, for no other reason at all, lets not only days and weeks but months slip by without performing the task that is his sacred duty. All this, the subjective critics ask us to believe; and yet, at the same time, they assure us that in their view Hamlet was not insane or sufficiently abnormal to vitiate his value as the hero of a tragedy. Professor Bradley seems truly to be in a dilemma: on the one hand, if Hamlet's melancholy is to explain his inactivity, the critic is obliged to say that "Hamlet's condition may truly be called diseased"; and yet, he insists, "this melancholy is something very different from insanity."¹⁶ Again and again, he characterizes the Prince's mind as "sickly" and "diseased": the present writer is under the impression that a mind so "diseased" that it cannot express its greatest wish in action is certainly not sane. To Professor Bradley, Hamlet's "melancholy" is "the centre of the tragedy"; and yet, as he himself assures us, the doings of a madman are not material for tragedy.¹⁷ To make matters even worse, to this dilemma, he adds a paradox, and boldly declares that this same melancholy, which so utterly paralyzes Hamlet's will, at the same time also "accounts for Hamlet's energy"¹⁸ in

¹⁶ Bradley, *op. cit.*, pp. 121 ff.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 123 ff.

such actions as he does perform. Truly, this strange "melancholy," which, we are told, is not "melancholy in the present sense of the word,"¹⁹ but arises in the Victorian sensibilities of a sophisticated Renaissance courtier; which is at once sane and "diseased"; which at once inhibits action and "accounts for Hamlet's energy"—truly this strange mental condition deserves study from the point of view of Elizabethan psychological and medical theory so that one may at least discover whether Shakespeare's contemporaries acknowledged such a state of mind, and whether Hamlet's symptoms actually illustrate it.

Aside from one incidental reference to Burton, Professor Bradley gives practically no citation from the writers on melancholy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; and quotations from recent alienists are of dubious pertinence, especially since the *New English Dictionary* sharply differentiates the earlier from the modern meanings of the word. Melancholy, to the Elizabethans belonged to several types: as a mere fashionable affectation, it appears in Shakespeare's Jaques; but the melancholy apparent in Hamlet's soliloquies was not a mere social pose; another type of melancholy, perhaps the most common in Elizabethan thought, came down from the medieval tradition of chivalric love, and arose from the unhappy restraint forced on the ardent lover by the coyness of his mistress—the sort of melancholy that Polonius imputed to Hamlet as a result of his frustrated wooing of Ophelia. But Hamlet was melancholy even before Ophelia started to repulse him; and, in his soliloquies, he associates his melancholy, not with his love of Ophelia, but with his unfulfilled revenge. Professor Bradley's theory, by the way, of the relation of Hamlet's melancholy to this love affair, is very strange: he suggests that it "deadened" Hamlet's affection for Ophelia.²⁰ Apparently, he confuses a symptom with a counter-agent.

Practically all critics agree that Hamlet's melancholy was neither a social affectation nor mainly a result of his thwarted

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

love: it was either his natural temperament, according to Sir E. K. Chambers; or, as Professor Bradley would say, it arose from the recent shock his nerves had undergone. If such theories be correct—if Shakespeare used melancholy as the primary motive for Hamlet's delay—then the learned, and especially the popular, mind must generally have considered melancholy a natural and usual cause for prolonged delay; and the idea should be a commonplace in contemporary writers on the subject. As a matter of fact, although melancholy was of course a well recognized disease caused by too much black bile in the system, expressing itself in a "malcontent" exasperation with the world, and treated generally by amusement, exercise, and diet,²¹ yet it was not supposed to arise from mental shock, and not usually supposed to cause paralysis of the will, inaction, or even procrastination. Professor Stoll, who has especially studied the "malcontent" type, does not appear to find any relation between the "melancholy" that characterized it and a tendency to delay;²² and Dr. Anderson, who has worked particularly on Elizabethan psychological theory, even suggests that such a condition of mind was thought to lead rather to action.²³ The supplementary researches of the present writer bear out this point of view. The tradition of Hippocrates did not consider inaction an effect of melancholy;²⁴ nor did that of Aristotle, whom an Elizabethan treatise cites as declaring that melancholy people were especially "desirous of revenge."²⁵ Practical medical books such as those by Barrough²⁶ and by Clowes,²⁷ though

²¹ See A. Boorde, *Dyetary*, E. E. T. S., Ex. Ser., X, 289; T. Nashe, *Terrors of Night*, in *Works*, ed. McKerrow, I, 357; T. Bright, *Treatise of Melancholy* (London, 1613, ed. princ., 1586), pp. 300 ff.; S. Guazzo, *Civile Conversation* (London, 1925), I, 18 ff. Shakespeare refers to recreation and exercise as the cure for melancholy (*Comedy of Errors*, I, ii, 20; *Loves Labours*, I, i, 234). Cf. the efforts of Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern with Hamlet.

²² E. E. Stoll, *M. P.*, III, 294 ff.

²³ Ruth L. Anderson, *Elizabethan Psychology and Shakespeare's Plays* (Iowa City, 1928), p. 78. See also O. J. Campbell, "Jaques," *Hunt. Lib. Bull.* No. 8.

²⁴ Hippocrates, *Aphorisms* (London, 1735), pp. 85, 200, 251.

²⁵ J. Huarte, *Examen de Ingenios*, tr. R. Carew (London, 1604), pp. 84-85, paper.

²⁶ P. Barrough, *Method of Phisicke* (London, 1591, ed. princ., 1583), *passim*.

²⁷ W. Clowes, *Proved Practice for all Young Chirgeons* (London, 1591), p. 97.

they by no means neglect the disease, do not note procrastination as a symptom; and a more popular work, likewise, Elyot's *Castel of Helth*, does not list it as a consequence of this sickness.²⁸ Bright, to be sure, remarks that "Melancholicke persons . . . be not so apt for action . . .";²⁹ but Bright's theory of melancholy, as he himself declares, was quite heterodox; and, moreover, he seems in this passage to be referring to the religious melancholy of the fanatics of the time. Overbury also says that a melancholy man is "all contemplation, no action"; but he looked on such a one as "crazed" and "a man only in shew".³⁰ Professor Bradley would hardly accept this as an analogue to Hamlet. In short, the Elizabethans did not think of melancholy as a natural and normal cause for procrastination and weakness of will.

On the contrary, a number both of learned and of popular works suggest that melancholy persons were especially fit for action, for politics, and even for Machiavellian intrigue. Walkington implies as much;³¹ Riche says that the melancholy man thinks himself "capable of managing the State";³² and Rowlands's "Melancholy Knight" is quite willing to kill the merry musicians who disturb him.³³ If Harrison be right in saying that Shakespeare's other important melancholy characters are Jaques, Timon, and Lear,³⁴ one should hesitate before declaring that the dramatist associated with this cast of mind indecision and paralysis of will. Perhaps most significant is the statement by the illustrious French physician Laurentius, whose works were read throughout Western Europe: "The melancholike are accounted as most fit to undertake matters of weightie charge and high attempt. *Aristotle* in his *Problemes* sayeth that the melancholike are most wittie and ingenious. . . ."³⁵ If then ability to transact important

²⁸ Sir T. Elyot, *Castel of Helth* (London, 1541), sig. 3 A.

²⁹ Bright, *op. cit.*, pp. 243 ff.

³⁰ Sir T. Overbury, *Characters*, "Melancholy Man."

³¹ [T. Walkington], *Optick Glasse of Humors* (London, 1639), p. 129.

³² B. Riche, *My Ladies Looking-glasse* (London, 1616), p. 53.

³³ S. Rowlands, *Melancholy Knight* (London, 1615).

³⁴ N. Breton, *Melancholike Humours*, ed. Harrison (London, 1929), p. 73.

³⁵ A. Laurentius (André du Laurens), *Discourse of the Preservation of the Sight*, tr. Svrplet (London, 1599), pp. 85 ff.

business was one result assigned to the melancholy temperament, this temperament could hardly have been looked upon as causing morbid inaction. Why then did Shakespeare make Hamlet melancholy?

In the light of Elizabethan ideas on the subject, Bradley's theory is particularly untenable. Elizabethans do not attribute melancholy to sudden mental shock. They often mention diet and want of exercise;³⁶ and Harrison adds over-eating of rich foods and decay of the teeth, for which the age is notorious.³⁷ Laurentius³⁸ and Batman³⁹ say that melancholy arises "without any apparent occasion"; but a number of authors, especially popular writers, impute the disease to the frustration of some natural impulse, such as love, ambition, or the like. The learned Bartholomew Anglicus seems to approximate this view when he describes melancholy as a condition in which the vital spirits were "impaired or let [hindered] in their working";⁴⁰ and, according to Professor Dover Wilson, something of this sort produced Hamlet's melancholy.⁴¹ Professor Wilson leaves this as a somewhat vague suggestion; and one may suppose that this hindrance from which Hamlet suffered may have been disappointed love, as Polonius suggests, or "thwarted ambition," as Claudius seems to believe, though neither of these is the dominant motive of the tragedy, nor in his melancholy soliloquies does Hamlet greatly stress them. Certainly, however, the Elizabethans looked upon melancholy as arising from some inhibition, or objective frustration, of the will. In the first scene of Chapman's *Revenge for Honor*, it appears as the consequence of enforced inaction; Marston's *Lampatho* likewise turns to melancholy because his scholarly

³⁶ E.g., Walkington, *op. cit.*, p. 133; A. Boorde, *Dyetary*, E.E.T.S., Ex. Ser., X, 289; T. Nashe, *Terrors of Night*, in *Works*, ed. McKerrow, I, 357; T. Bright, *op. cit.*, pp. 300 ff.; and [I. M.], *General Practise of Medicine* (London, 1634), sig. B 2 and 3.

³⁷ Harrison, *op. cit.*, p. 61; and A. G. Bieber, *Der Melancholikertypus Shakespeares und sein Ursprung* (Heidelberg, 1913), pp. 43-44.

³⁸ Laurentius, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

³⁹ Batman *uppon Bartholome his Booke "De Proprietatibus Rerum"* (London, 1583), Lib. IV, Cap. 11, 32-33.

⁴⁰ See *Medical Lore*, ed. R. Steele, p. 31.

⁴¹ J. Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet* (New York, 1935), p. 117.

ambitions have no outlet;⁴² and Nashe likens a "brain oppressed with melancholy" to a "clocke tyde doune with too heaue weights."⁴³ Perhaps, however, the fullest statement of this theory of the atrabilious humor occurs in Earle's *Micro-cosmographie*: if fortune fail to recognize the "worth" of a "High Spirited Man" and so contravene his hopes, he "turns desperately melancholy"; and similarly, a "Discontented Man" is a "noble mind" suffering from "ambition thwarted." In short, the Elizabethans thought of melancholy as a consequence rather than a cause of inactivity; and, to find its relation to the play, one should examine into the ways in which Hamlet's will was thwarted and an unwelcome inactivity forced upon him.

If any further proof of the Elizabethan theory of the atrabilious be required, an examination may well be made of Burton's famous *Anatomy of Melancholy*, the most elaborate work on the subject in the period. Following Melancthon,⁴⁴ Burton imputes the origin of the disease to "some grievous trouble, dislike, passion, or discontent." He seems to consider the causes largely psychological; and, in his opinion, religious melancholy in particular arose from a frustration of religious hope and ended in an insane despair.⁴⁵ After recounting the usual cures, diet, exercise, and sleep, he takes up rather fully the mental aspects of the disease under the headings of the passions most affected. He declares that its causes are "most commonly" not merely physical, but that "fear, grief and some sudden commotion, or perturbation of the mind, begin it, in such bodies especially as are ill-disposed."⁴⁶ The "most frequent and ordinary" causes are "love, joy, desire, hatred, sorrow, fear"; and, "if they be immoderate, they consume the spirits, and melancholy is especially caused by them."⁴⁷ Wise men use religion and philosophy to give these passions an inner curb; but, if one fails to do so and meets with outer re-

⁴² Marston, *What You Will*, ed. Bullen, II, ii, 120. See also Bieber, *op. cit.*, pp. 43-44.

⁴³ Nashe, *Works*, ed. cit., I, 357.

⁴⁴ Melancthon, *Tract XIV*, Cap. 2, "De anima."

⁴⁵ Burton, *Anatomy*, Pt. III, Sec. iv, Memb. 2.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, I, ii, 5.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, I, ii, 3.

straint, then melancholy is almost sure to follow, especially in the case of love and ambition. Hamlet is under the influence of almost all of the emotions cited by Burton; but he supplies an inner curb to his love and apparently to his ambition: one may therefore infer that his melancholy arises partly from sorrow at his father's death, partly from fear and hatred of Claudius—a hatred that circumstances will not permit him to express at once in a signal and satisfying revenge. Thus the Elizabethan theory of the malady not only fails to support the subjective critics of the play but gives definite support to the objective critics by explaining Hamlet's melancholy as the natural psychological reaction to an enforced delay.

That this use of the Elizabethan medical theory of "humors" to express the psychological evolution of a character is not unusual in Shakespeare clearly appears in the studies of Miss Campbell and of Miss Anderson already noted, and also in a series of current papers by the present author. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the hero reverts from love-melancholy to his sanguine disposition when he gives up his hopeless love affair with Rosaline for marriage with Juliet. Kate the Shrew, under the violent ministrations of her husband, is tamed from her choleric disposition. In *Twelfth Night*, the Duke Orsino is, like Romeo, deep in love-melancholy at the repeated rejections of Olivia; but, toward the end of the play, he transfers his affections to the more pliant Viola, and so, again like Romeo, is apparently cured of his disease. Lear, after a prolonged middle age, sweeps suddenly to dotage, and expresses this change by turning from the choleric to the melancholy temper; and the sanguine Timon reacts to his sudden misfortunes by experiencing a corrosive melancholy that culminates in suicide. Shakespeare had too great a knowledge of life and was too great a dramatist not to realize that events mould human character, and he was too much an Elizabethan not to phrase these natural changes in contemporary terms, the only terms that he and his audience knew. Surely then, a forthright hero such as Hamlet, when thwarted in his natural

impulses, could hardly fail to show a bitter exasperation, which such men in every age have shown under such circumstances, and which the Elizabethans expressed by the term "melancholy."

If any critics have the hardihood to affirm that Shakespeare employs this word in some sense that does not accord with the usual Elizabethan meanings—and that would court misunderstanding by his audience—let them survey its fifty or more uses throughout the plays. Shakespeare regularly derives a lover's melancholy from frustrated passion; and, when the melancholy he depicts is not the result of love or the mere affectation of a fashionable pose, it is commonly the characteristic of one who is plotting to achieve some foiled ambition, and it certainly does not express itself in weakness or paralysis of the will. Cassius, the chief conspirator in *Julius Caesar*, and Don John, the ambitious bastard in *Much Ado*, are "melancholy." Jaques, in his long discourse on this humor, attributes the soldier's melancholy to "ambition," and declares the lawyer's "politic"; but, in all his enumeration of the types of the disease, he never mentions weakness of will as a symptom or a consequence. Evans, indeed, in *Merry Wives*, refers to his "melancholies" as a prologue to his boast of military prowess against the Doctor. The "Induction" to *The Taming of the Shrew* portrays melancholy as "the nurse of frenzy," to be cured, as in *Hamlet*, by plays and pastimes. Mrs. Ford accuses her husband of "melancholy," i.e., of having "some crotchets" in his head that make him raging jealous. The Duke Orsino in *Twelfth Night*, certainly does not allow his melancholy to hinder the violence of his wooing; and the shrewd and calculating Olivia is "addicted to a melancholy." In *King John*, melancholy is a "surly spirit"—something very different from the modern, sentimental meaning of the word that suggests rather a sweet passivity. In *Richard II*, melancholy is "sour"; and, in *Lear*, as in *Julius Caesar* and in *Much Ado*, it is clearly associated with intrigue; for the "cue" of the Machiavellian bastard Edmund is a "villainous melancholy."

The word "melancholy" occurs twice in *Hamlet*: once

when the Prince voices the commonplace of Elizabethan demonology, that his melancholy makes him especially subject to supernatural influence; and again when the King declares to Polonius that the reason for Hamlet's strange behavior is not love but

something in his soul
O'er which his melancholy sits on brood,
And I do doubt the hatch and the disclose
Will be some danger.

If Shakespeare thought that "melancholy" implied paralysis of the will, why was the King so fearful of "danger" from it that he packed Hamlet off as soon as possible for England? Surely, this use of the word, like "melancholy" elsewhere in Shakespeare, is quite in the Elizabethan sense: it is a state of mind that belongs, not to the harmless dreamer but to the dangerous conspirator, who is thwarted either in his personal ambition or in some other desired activity. Rosencrantz at once imputes Hamlet's melancholy to his thwarted "ambition." Thus his father's death, his mother's marriage, and probably his own defeated hopes for the crown caused Hamlet's initial melancholy; but, more important, the oft reiterated doubt concerning the Ghost's identity obliged him to hesitate before committing the dreadful act of regicide; and this enforced inaction, exasperating a nature that was accustomed to soldierly promptitude rather than to patient waiting on events, produced the bitter melancholy that Hamlet expresses in the soliloquies, and that Claudius refers to. Later in the play, he still is melancholy; for lack of apt occasion still inhibits his revenge. The present writer cannot accept Professor Bradley's interpretation of Hamlet's delay because, among other reasons, it requires a theory of melancholy that is not apparent in contemporary treatments of the subject, popular and learned, not apparent in Shakespeare's own use of the word, in his portrayal of the state of mind throughout his plays and especially in the references to "melancholy" in *Hamlet* itself.

Not only do these subjective interpretations of Hamlet's character fail to explain the delay which they were intended

to motivate, they usually put the minor characters in an impossible light; for sympathy of these critics is so concentrated on the hero's inner self that Hamlet becomes the sole reality of the play; and the tragedy becomes a sort of Byron's *Manfred*. Although his mind is "diseased," the other characters are interpreted solely in terms of his opinion of them. Thus not only Osric but Polonius and Ophelia are mere fools, or perhaps a combination of fool and knave; and not only Claudius, but also Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and all the court and especially Queen Gertrude, are mere villains. Thus the play becomes the fantastic efforts of a madman to wreak vengeance on a society composed of fools and knaves; and we are expected to accept this as Shakespeare's most significant tragedy. Such an interpretation not only runs counter to all realism of Renaissance society, and so must have revolted the good sense of intelligent Elizabethans, and exasperated the courtiers in the audience to whom it would surely seem a travesty of their profession, but also it obviously runs counter to the play itself. Was this "corrupt" and decadent court, the court of that ideal king, the Elder Hamlet? Polonius certainly had long been Chamberlain; and the others, except perhaps Osric, show no signs of being recent interlopers. In *As You Like It* and *Macbeth*, the rule of a wicked tyrant forces the old nobility to flee; and Shakespeare draws a sharp distinction between the virtuous court of a former worthy monarch and the evil companions of his bad successor. In *Hamlet*, the court continues quite as it was before; and one must either suppose, with Professor Jones, that the Elder Hamlet's rule was far from the ideal and that his court was consequently "corrupt," or that the court of Claudius was at the most no worse than the average and that the rule of Claudius, as far as those around him could observe, was at least reasonably just and competent. Of course the present writer, as the preceding chapters show, does not fully accept Hamlet's low estimate of Polonius, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and the rest; but, even waiving the ample evidence of their own words and actions, the presumption of dramatic realism in a play

written to please a courtly audience, and the necessity of dramatic consistency in the picture of the Elder Hamlet's reign, would require that they be something better than the subjective critics have regularly pictured them.

The difficulties with the subjective theories, however, do not end with a consideration of the minor characters: they impinge upon problems of plot construction and of theme. The only scene before the catastrophe in which Hamlet and Claudius meet in open clash is at the presentation of the play; and, except for the catastrophe, this is the one great scene with practically all the principal figures on the stage: Hamlet and Horatio, the King and Queen enthroned, and the entire court, including Ophelia and Polonius. This scene, moreover, Shakespeare deliberately shifted from its place in the second act of the *Bestrafte Brudermord* to the central position in the tragedy where one might expect to find the critical turning point; it is carefully prepared for; and the play-within-the-play especially is led up to and emphasized as a matter of first importance. The theatrical pomp and circumstance of the scene is at least as great as any other in the piece; it seems to influence the action and it certainly perturbs all the major characters. No wonder, it has been called the climactic center of the tragedy, the turning point of the plot. But the subjective critics have the greatest difficulty in finding any point in it at all: for, if Hamlet was already certain that the message of the Ghost was true, why bother with the play? In that case, it merely gave valuable information to the enemy by informing Claudius that Hamlet knew his secret, and so put Hamlet in a serious danger that he had all along attempted to avoid by feigning insanity. Dr. Adams admits that the play was "ill-advised," and can find no better purpose for it than "to annoy Claudius."⁴⁸ Professor Bradley boldly abandons the play-scene as the crisis and chooses rather the scene with Claudius at prayer as "the turning point of the tragedy,"⁴⁹ a scene of far less effect upon the stage. Yet does even this scene

⁴⁸ *Hamlet*, ed. J. Q. Adams (Boston, 1929), p. 244.

⁴⁹ Bradley, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

supply the "turning point" according to Professor Bradley's own interpretation? Hamlet continues to delay; and the subjective critics make light of the religious objections that stayed his hand. Indeed, should not the subjective critics make rather the chance killing of Polonius as their critical "turning point"; for it is Hamlet's first overt act against the King. If the tragedy is the struggle between Hamlet's promptings to revenge and his inborn or acquired tendency toward inaction, then the first conquest of this inaction must be the crisis that leads to the consummation of this revenge in the catastrophe. But from the point of view of the theater, can the killing of Polonius by mistake for his royal master be the crucial moment of the play? It is but slightly prepared for; it has but slight histrionic possibilities; it is over in a moment; and the dialogue that surrounds it has nothing to do with Hamlet's delay, but deals rather with the misdeeds of Gertrude and the character of Polonius. Indeed, it is the merest introduction to the great scene that follows. In short, if one accept the subjective theory, the logical "turning point" of the play is a short passage that allows for little emphasis upon the stage; and the great scene of over four hundred lines in which Hamlet tests the veracity of the Ghost is insignificant and pointless. Is this the sort of dramaturgy that the subjective critics would impute to Shakespeare?

According to this theory furthermore, not only the crisis but the catastrophe of the play is out of focus. If the theme be Hamlet's inner struggle with his disillusion and his melancholy, then his melancholy should abate and be conquered by his promptings to revenge as he nears the time when he achieves final action. As a matter of fact, however, the last act has in it some of his bitterest self-reproaches; and the scene at Ophelia's grave probably shows Hamlet more "melancholy" than any other passage in the play; and yet this scene takes place only a few short hours before he so frees himself from the disease that he accomplishes his purpose! If, on the other hand, one think of melancholy as a consequence of enforced inaction, one would expect it to grow more and more severe the more

the inaction was prolonged. In the final scene itself, moreover, though Hamlet, after killing the King, delivers himself of over twenty lines, he nowhere expresses relief at having overcome his melancholy sufficiently to do the deed; in fact, melancholy and paralysis of will do not figure in the final scene at all. He accepts the challenge against the advice of Horatio; he kills Laertes and then the King without the slightest hesitation, and then spends his dying words in settling the succession and in urging Horatio to defend his memory, while he dashes from the lips of his friend the poisoned goblet. If Hamlet's dominant trait be an inhibition of the will, then such a *finale* either needs a deal of psychological explaining, which Shakespeare does not supply, or else the play is the veriest ranting melodrama with a maladjusted conclusion.

In short, the present writer cannot accept the subjective interpretations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*—cannot accept them, not merely because Professor Bradley and Sir E. K. Chambers, perhaps inadvertently, give their case away by admitting that their theories are not Elizabethan, not merely because these interpretations were late in developing and suspiciously Romantic in their point of view, but also because they are not self-consistent, because they do not accord with the Elizabethan concept of melancholy, because they do not accord with a reasonable interpretation of the minor characters and with the obvious prejudices of Shakespeare's courtly audience, and because they throw the dramaturgy of the play hopelessly out of gear, suggesting that Shakespeare emphasized the insignificant and passed over the important. Professor Bradley's interpretation is not even self-consistent; for Hamlet cannot be at once so melancholy that his will is paralyzed and yet so sane and normal that he is the fit hero for a tragedy; and, furthermore, the Elizabethan concept of melancholy does not make it a cause for loss of will. To Shakespeare's contemporaries, moreover, neither Sir E. K. Chambers's prince-philosopher nor Professor Bradley's sufferer from nervous shock would be subject for admiration as a hero. Such theories, indeed, run counter, not only to the spirit of

the age, but also to the very play itself; for the minor characters, who support the King rather than the Prince, could not have been so wicked and "corrupt" and still have constituted the court of the Elder Hamlet; and, even more seriously, these theories run counter to the play because they give it a theme that is illustrated neither in the crisis nor the catastrophe.

If an inner cause did not actuate Hamlet's delay, then one must seek to explain it in some restraint that the condition of affairs placed on his actions: and three such objective reasons for delay have been suggested: (1) the guards about the king; (2) the necessity of winning the approval of the court; (3) the injunction of the Ghost that Gertrude be not harmed. These reasons, set forth most notably by Klein and Werder in the mid-nineteenth century, are only partly satisfactory. (1) Evidence is lacking that the King kept a body-guard in constant personal attendance: indeed, there was no sufficient guard when Laertes broke into the palace. Hamlet himself, moreover, is under no surveillance until after the closet-scene. (2) Hamlet makes no effort to win the approval of Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Osric, or Polonius; nor does he speak of the importance of a public justification of his revenge. (3) The injunction of the Ghost that he do no harm to Gertrude could hardly have kept him from stabbing Claudius in one of the scenes in which he and Hamlet were together; and it certainly did not restrain him from the killing of Polonius when he mistook him for the King.

Any adequate solution of this problem must explain Hamlet's delay in terms, not of some ingenious reason devised by the critic which Shakespeare might have used, but by some explanation that throughout the play must have been obvious to an Elizabethan audience and that Shakespeare emphasized in the dialogue. The material set forth in the preceding chapters, especially the material on the Ghost, would seem to indicate that Hamlet delayed his revenge for the months that intervened between his learning of the apparition's message and the performance of the play-within-the-play, because he

feared to commit so heinous a sin as regicide on the dubious evidence of this supernatural revelation. He devised the play to test this revelation, and found it true. He did not kill Claudius at prayer for the obvious religious reasons that he stated. Without the least weakness of will or hesitation, he tried to kill him behind the arras, but stabbed Polonius instead. Thereafter, he was hurried off to England; and Claudius, warned by the play-within-the-play, was on his guard. In short, Hamlet's delay in the first half of the tragedy arose from his doubt of the King's guilt; and, in the second half, from his lack of real opportunity until the fencing scene. Such an interpretation gives point to the play-within-the-play as the crisis of the piece, the place where Hamlet is convinced that revenge is justified; it explains his growing melancholy in Elizabethan terms as arising from his doubts and thwarted efforts; and it depicts the catastrophe, not as the conclusion of an inner conflict of the will, a sort of lyric struggle in himself, but as the consequence of his outward and dramatic conflict with the King, a conflict of intrigue and finesse in the appropriate setting of Renaissance court-life.

While various chapters of the present volume were appearing in the philological and other periodicals, Professor Dover Wilson published his study *What Happens in Hamlet*. This work shows the growing emancipation of British scholarship from subjective Romantic criticism; and it presents interesting side lights on certain aspects of the play; but, as the title implies, it treats the minor characters only in incidental fashion; and, moreover, the critic still writes under the shadow of Professor Bradley. Nevertheless, it provides suggestive *aperçus* on particular scenes and passages; and one regrets that the author has limited himself so purely to the action of the play that one is obliged to learn chiefly by mere inference his interpretation of character and theme.⁵⁰

For over a century, the study of Shakespeare, and especially of *Hamlet* has belonged to the field, not of literary criti-

⁵⁰ See R. W. Babcock, "A Prince of Shreds and Patches," *Bulletin of the Shak. Assoc. Am.*, XI, 175 ff.

cism, but of religion; and the prophets of this religion have interpreted their creed, not in particular accordance with their sacred book, but—as prophets usually do—in accordance rather with their own wishes, or feelings, or inner spiritual needs; and they have settled matters with an infallible *ipse dixit*. Disagreement with this vulgate doctrine is looked upon either as mere triviality or outrageous heresy. Nevertheless of late, such heresy has increased—critics who, judging the play sometimes on the very principles proclaimed by the orthodox, have come to the conclusion that it is a mere conglomerate, either of theatrical conventions or of senseless inconsistencies. These, indeed, are truly serious heresies; for they strike at the very root of Shakespeare's reputation and of the value of his works; they justify the attitude of some modern educators who declare that Shakespeare is not worth the effort of study anyway; and, surely, he is not, if all that one can find in him is outworn stage-convention and ranting melodrama, without reality of character or significance of theme. The present writer may be a heretic; but he happens to be far more orthodox than this; for, at the risk of destroying the religious cult of Shakespeare, he has set out to find the Elizabethan *Hamlet*; and, if Shakespeare deserves his reputation, the Elizabethan *Hamlet* should reveal those qualities of competent dramaturgy, truth to life and depth of meaning, for which Shakespeare's plays for centuries have enjoyed the highest praise: the three concluding chapters of the present study will concern themselves with Hamlet's character, with the plot of the tragedy, and with its significance of theme both for the Elizabethans and for modern times.

CHAPTER XII

PRINCE HAMLET

SOME CRITICS have attributed the difficulties and apparent inconsistencies of *Hamlet* to Shakespeare's following perforce a plot already popular on the stage, and yet attempting to reinterpret the title role in a fashion quite inconsistent with this sequence of episodes.¹ Shakespeare, indeed, does follow the general outline of events in the *Bestrafte Brudermord*; but, according to the present writer's interpretation, no serious inconsistency exists between these events and Shakespeare's depiction of the Prince. In the old play, Hamlet loves his father, and is bitter that his mother and uncle cut short their mourning to make way for their nuptials. The Prince, though he has been at the university for at least "a few years," already is titular King of Norway; and he is so much of a soldier that he sometimes "goes the rounds" to see that the guard is properly on duty. He hears the message of the Ghost, who "cannot rest" until he is revenged; Hamlet is horrified, and swears Horatio and his fellow-soldiers to secrecy. He is apparently intimate with Horatio from the first, and tells him of the regicide at once. Though obviously out of tune with the new reign, he attends court, and promises to stay in Denmark rather than return to the university. Act II opens with the Queen distressed at Hamlet's seeming madness—in fact, throughout the play, the Queen seems sadder than Hamlet. The Chamberlain declares that the cause of this madness must be the Prince's love for Ophelia. He and the King hide and overhear the lovers talk; but still the King is unconvinced. Horatio has made Hamlet doubt the Ghost's veracity. The actors come; and Hamlet arranges for a play that will test the King's guilt. The play is given. The King cries out that it "does not please" him, and leaves the stage, followed by the

¹ E.g., C. M. Lewis, *Genesis of Shakespeare's Hamlet* (New York, 1907).

court. Hamlet comments to Horatio: "Now thou seest that the Ghost has not deceived me. . . . Now can I dare to go on boldly with my revenge"; and Horatio replies, "Yes, your highness, the thing is certain." Act II ends with Hamlet urging the Chamberlain to treat the actors well. Act III begins with the prayer-scene, and quickly passes on to the killing of Polonius and the private conversation between Hamlet and his mother, which is interrupted by the Ghost. At the end, Gertrude has a soliloquy in which she declares Hamlet mad, and repents of robbing him of the crown. The rustic Jens and the court fool Phantasmo supply the place of the gravediggers in giving comic relief and in showing the attitude of the lower classes. Ophelia's madness supplies more comedy. The Chamberlain is buried, and Hamlet sent to England with two lackeys who are to kill him. At the beginning of Act IV, Hamlet by a ruse overcomes his murderers and starts back to Denmark. Meanwhile, the Chamberlain's son demands from the King an explanation of his father's death; they hear of Hamlet's return; and the King arranges the fencing match. Act V contains Hamlet's dialogue with Horatio, Ophelia's death, and the fencing bout. Some of Shakespeare's minor characters, such as Fortinbras and Osric, do not appear; and the action is, in consequence, somewhat simplified; some of the episodes are arranged in different order; and the act-divisions are put forward so that the play-within-the-play comes in the first half of the tragedy: on the whole, however, the plot of the *Bestrafte Brudermord* runs very close to that of *Hamlet*.

But in the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, the other dramatic elements of character and setting, though usually consistent enough, are developed only in a feeble and desultory way. Motivation is so slightly and so casually implied that the characters seem mere types rather than individualized personalities; and there is little realism of Renaissance courtly life. Despite all this, the character of the Prince and his background in the play are essentially the same as the personality that Shakespeare portrays as the normal Hamlet, before he

was burdened by his great responsibility. In the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, as in Shakespeare, he is clearly a Prince worthy of respect and even love: every one pays him this compliment of respect, from the soldiers even to Claudius; and the Queen, Ophelia, and Horatio show him a deep affection. He is brave and keen-witted, and has a high sense of justice. He is capable of both thought and action. He is not only the soldier and the scholar but also something of the courtier, though this side of his character is far less developed than in Shakespeare. The old play, therefore, lays down the fundamental traits of the Hamlet of Shakespeare who whiled away the time with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern at the theater in Wittenberg; but the great difference between the two conceptions lies in the failure of the *Bestrafte Brudermord* to express the reaction of Hamlet's great task and his enforced delay upon his character. Although he is "sad" at the opening of the play because of his father's death, even this sadness seems to disappear as the plot follows its course; and there is nothing of the irritation and exasperation, the rebellion against things in general, the "melancholy" of the Elizabethan psychology, that Shakespeare's Hamlet so amply illustrates. In short, the source does not show the natural reaction of the situation upon the mood of the chief character; but Shakespeare's tragedy does show this reaction. Hamlet's melancholy is not a new conception of the Prince's character superimposed ineptly upon an old popular story—such was not Shakespeare's way of doing things!—but rather the very outgrowth of this story and its proper expression in the psychology of the hero. Shakespeare then borrowed, not only the main outline of his plot from the old play by Kyd but also his conception of the normal Hamlet as soldier, prince, and courtier: he deepened and vivified this conception, and, as a masterstroke of verisimilitude, he also depicted the natural and expected reaction of this sort of person to the situation in which Hamlet was involved: the soldier, accustomed to express himself in action, and the courtier, accustomed to express himself in words, but now involved

in an intrigue in which he dares neither act nor speak, but can only bide his time and chafe at his restraint.

How old is this impatient Prince, who so unwillingly brooks delay? Scholars have put Hamlet everywhere from his 'teens to his early thirties, and have built interpretations of his character more or less on the conception of a younger, or an older, Hamlet. The theories set forth in the present volume do not necessarily require him to be of any particular age: he must be old and wise enough to realize the necessity of delay and young enough for it to gall his spirit; but the former requires no great age and the latter no great youth. The exigencies of stage-performance, however, require that Hamlet's age as far as possible be investigated. Several more or less pertinent passages in the play have been cited to prove that the Prince was about thirty: Gertrude was a "matron"; but she might be called a "matron" if he were but fifteen and she but thirty-five. The player-queen had been married thirty years; but, even if this be taken as true of Gertrude, it does not prove that the only son was born in the first year of wedlock. Better evidence comes from the speeches of the gravediggers in the final act: in the course of their dialogue with Hamlet, we learn that in the same year when the Prince was born, Fortinbras was defeated and the gravedigger took up his calling as sexton; and, some twenty lines later, it appears that this last event was thirty years ago. Thus if an audience remembered the earlier statement, it would assume that Hamlet is thirty years of age. Later in the scene occurs another piece of evidence to the same effect: in the course of some ten lines, we learn that the jester Yorick has been dead for twenty-three years and that Hamlet remembers being carried about on his shoulders. The first quarto omits the former of these passages, and changes the latter from twenty-three years to twelve, thus making Hamlet about seventeen or eighteen years of age; but the first quarto text is usually looked upon as doubtful. These two critical passages in the later quartos and the folio would hardly be very telling to an audience who saw, rather than read, the play; for spectators are not given to remembering exact numbers over

a space even of ten or twenty lines; but, even so, this would be sufficient proof, were it not so amply contradicted elsewhere in the play.

Life was short in the early seventeenth century; Iago at twenty-eight seems to be middle-aged; and, as the foregoing study of Polonius has shown, old age was under way at forty. A Hamlet of thirty years ought surely to be a sedate and settled man of the world, a prince quite ready to assume responsibility; and Gertrude should be an elderly woman of about fifty—hardly an age at which she could have aroused the ardent passion of Claudius. In fact, all of the evidence in the play aside from these two scraps of dialogue in the final act point to a much younger Hamlet. The gamesome Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who had been brought up with the Prince from early childhood, may still be properly called "lads"; and Hamlet calls them his "schoolfellows." Sons of the nobility usually attended college for two or three years during their later 'teens as a prelude to foreign travel and to a career at court; and Hamlet clearly had not finished his studies; for, until Gertrude dissuaded him, he planned to go "back to school" at Wittenberg. But the Prince's university connection and his association with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern form only a part of the evidence. In all the versions of the play, including the first quarto, Horatio calls him "young Hamlet," when he is first mentioned to the audience at the end of the initial scene; and, later in the act, the Ghost addresses him as "thou noble Youth," and refers to his "young blood." Laertes says that his love for Ophelia is "a violet in the youth of primy [springtime] nature"; Polonius calls him "young"; and Ophelia mentions his "youth." Hamlet refers to the "trivial fond records" of his "youth"; Polonius compares the love-sickness of his own "youth" with Hamlet's madness; and Hamlet contrasts his own scanty years with the age of Polonius. These references are all from the early acts when our idea of the Prince is being formed; and they can hardly refer to an Elizabethan gentleman of thirty.

Some scholars follow the suggestion of Furnivall² that Shakespeare changed his conception of Hamlet's age about the middle of the play; but, even late in the fourth act, Claudius compares Hamlet's fencing to "A very riband in the cap of youth"; and, in Act V, in the very scene that twice makes Hamlet thirty by arithmetic, one of the gravediggers, according to all the versions, quarto and folio, refers to the Prince as "young Hamlet," although perhaps the adjective was added merely to distinguish him from his father. In short, the evidence of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, of the Ghost, of Claudius, of Polonius, Laertes, and Ophelia, and perhaps of the gravediggers themselves, points to a youthful Hamlet; and, to the Elizabethans, "young" implied even fewer years than it does today, for old age set in sooner. His attendance at the university, his love affair, his skill in fencing, all suggest youth: indeed, whatever the stupid rustics say, Shakespeare actually conceived of a youthful Hamlet. Perhaps the First Clown knew as little of his dates as he did of "Crowner's Quest Law"; perhaps, like many elderly peasants, he was boastfully exaggerating his own venerable years; the fact that Hamlet appears as thirty only in the later versions of the text suggests that these passages perhaps were added to fit the advancing years of Burbage who played the part;³ perhaps the inconsistency is merely one of those chance slips that an audience would never notice and that Elizabethan plays abound in; and Shakespeare in particular shows an indifference to mathematical accuracy: the Duke's reign in *Measure for Measure* is given as fourteen and also as nineteen years in length, and similar inconsistencies appear in the *Comedy of Errors* and *The Taming of the Shrew*.⁴ At all events, the gay companion of Rosencrantz and the lover of Ophelia was a youth apparently in his later 'teens; and, for that reason if no other, the present writer would prefer to consider likewise as a youth the Hamlet who chafed so bitterly against the enforced inaction of his intrigue

² Furnivall, *Trans. New Shak. Soc.*, Part II, 1874, 494.

³ See T. W. Baldwin, *The Origin and Personnel of the Shakespearean Company* (Princeton, 1927), pp. 237 ff.

⁴ See *Measure for Measure*, old Rolfe ed., p. 138.

against the King. Indeed, the funeral elegy of Burbage, particularly refers to his success in the role of "young Hamlet"; and the Restoration stage seems also to have interpreted Hamlet as a youth.

What sort of person then was this young man who hastened to Elsinore at the news of his father's death and later found himself involved in such a dreadful situation? Ophelia describes him as a courtier, a scholar, and a soldier; and, though the first and last of these qualities are apparent in the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, Shakespeare develops and particularizes them beyond his source. In the old play, Hamlet is a "skilled swordsman," and keeps an eye on the palace guard; and in Shakespeare, his soldiership again and again appears throughout the action. Hamlet, like his father, is popular among both court and commons of this "warlike" nation under its "martial" king. He admires soldierly ideals, especially in the quixotic Fortinbras; he votes for Fortinbras as successor to the crown; and Fortinbras orders him a military funeral at the end. In fact, the chivalric Fortinbras is but a segment of his own character: they were one figure in the *Bestrafte Brudermord*; and Shakespeare cut this one figure into two. Even more vivid to an audience, Hamlet's actions early in the play reveal his bravery: he not only addresses the Ghost, as did Horatio, but, in spite of his companions, trusts himself alone with it in private conversation. He is the first, moreover, to board the pirate ship. He is quick to action, being once resolved: he kills Polonius on the instant; he forgoes the dispatch of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern without a second thought; he kills Claudius the moment that opportunity seems propitious. Furthermore, he knows how to use his weapons; and, even when he is overweight and out of practice, he can defeat the accomplished Laertes. These matters are no mere accidental remains from Shakespeare's source: in the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, Hamlet escapes from Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by a mere ruse; Shakespeare deliberately substitutes the battle with the pirates. Shakespeare's Hamlet is a soldier in training, in ideals, and in execution.

Hamlet the "scholar," which some critics have so greatly stressed, is the least evident of the several aspects of his character mentioned by Ophelia; and she merely mentions without emphasizing it. As the present study has already shown, great learning in a prince was considered a defect rather than an advantage; and one would not expect the ideal Hamlet to be immersed in books like Prospero or to be the mere human mouthpiece of a philosophic system. On the contrary, Hamlet at the university had for his close friends, not the scholarly Horatio, but the gay and well-born Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. His discourse shows no great learning: he does not cite classical authority, nor descant on history or on demonology, as does Horatio; and his remarks on life and death and the affairs of men, like most great lyric poetry, consist of eternal and well-known truths revived by a phraseology so happy as to be timeless. Any man under such circumstance might follow this train of thought, though he were quite incapable of Shakespeare's lyric phrase. The Elizabethan dramatist, unlike the modern, felt himself free "to ignore the thread of his plot and devote the dialogue to the statement of . . . the moral and philosophical."⁵ Thus Shakespeare does not hesitate to interpolate moralizing, sometimes more, sometimes less, apropos; and the conventionality (though not the poetry) of Hamlet's famous soliloquy on suicide is attested by its close resemblance to a passage in the prefatory *Discourse* of de Mornay's *Antonius*, which was translated in 1592.⁶ The dramatic value of the soliloquies is the expression that they give, not to Hamlet's ideas, but to his otherwise pent-up feelings. The confines of drama forbid the adequate expression of a philosophic system, which is hard enough to set forth even in treatise form. Indeed, when Shakespeare is avowedly depicting a philosopher, the Stoic Brutus or the Cynic Apemantus, the philosophy is barely sketched in the background: drama deals, not in abstractions, but in men and women. In short, when Ophelia calls Hamlet a "scholar," she surely did not

⁵ See A. L. Walker, "Convention in Shakespeare's Description of Emotion," *P. Q.*, XVII, 26 and 28-30.

⁶ P. de Mornay, *Antonius* (London, 1592), sig., C 4 v and D 1.

mean that he was Grotius or Spinoza; and Hamlet himself rather jeers at the "philosophy" of Horatio and at the inability of "philosophy" to plumb the depths of human fickleness and deceit.

Shakespeare especially develops Hamlet as the courtier, the ideal gentleman of the Renaissance. Ophelia emphasizes him in this character: he is the "rose of the fair state, The glass of fashion and the mould of form, The observ'd of all observers. . . ." He is her lover, the utterer of "honied" vows and writer of ardent letters. Renaissance absolutism set a great premium upon the arts of pleasing; and to be "euphues," to be elegant in manner, was the *beau idéal* of all the upper classes. Hamlet is indeed the "chiefest courtier" of King Claudius; the common people who judge with "their eyes," adore him; and he is doubtless pleased; for, like a true Renaissance gentleman, he values his general reputation, as he declares before the players, and hopes for an immortality, if not in heaven, at least of earthly fame; and, that his story may be rightly told, he snatches the poisoned goblet from Horatio. Hamlet has been a gay youth, but not with the unlicensed gaiety of the newly rich; for he is an easy master of decorum, and, when he pleases, of the involved etiquette of the day: his greetings and his leave-takings express it, and also the fine courtesy with which, at the end of the first act, he asks Horatio and Marcellus to quit the stage "together" with him, rather than pause while he precedes, as was his princely right. When Hamlet casts aside this decorum in speech and especially in dress, Ophelia is horrified, Polonius is embarrassed in conversing with him; and Claudius can only say, "I have nothing with this answer," or "Alas, alas!" or "What dost thou mean by this?" Indeed, Hamlet uses this neglect of due propriety to express his feigned insanity; and the contrast of his rudeness with Polonius, Ophelia, and Claudius over against his charm with Horatio, is the measure of how utterly he has changed. Hamlet is master of every note in the gamut of courtly behavior: he can be gracious and winning with Horatio, elaborate and affected with Osric, merry and intimate with Rosencrantz and

Guildenstern; he can show mock ceremony to Polonius, and to his mother, a mixture of affection and disgust. He can move among the social classes graciously giving to each one just a trifle more than its due of courtesy: the normal Hamlet is truly the "mould of form."

Indeed, a youthful Hamlet best agrees with Claudius' description of him as "Most generous, and free from all contriving"; for a man of thirty with years of Renaissance court-life behind him, unless he were a fool, could hardly have been so trustful and naïve as the depth of his disillusion indicates. In the early part of the play, although his respect for his mother is already shaken, he still retains this trust in men and women, an impulse to think the best of them that conditions will allow. He depends on Marcellus and Horatio to keep the oath of secrecy; and he is slow to believe in the seeming falsity of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and even trusts them with the secret that he is mad only "north-northwest." But the efforts of his former playmates to learn his secret and the apparent disaffection of Ophelia, make him more wary. Deception is hateful to him; the smiling countenance of Claudius is a very symbol of all that he abhors; and, during the dialogue of the second act, he comes to see treachery all around him, and begins to impute the worst of motives to his old friends and to Polonius and even to Ophelia; and, in the play-scene, he learns that Claudius is indeed a murderer. Some critics would have us think that this Swifitean bitterness toward mankind quite overcame his judgment; but Hamlet, though unfair to those about him, especially to the Queen, and mistaken in his belief as to their motives, does not lose all his poise and balance, as does the young Laertes: even in the case of Claudius, whom he most despises, he suspends his judgment until *The Murder of Gonzago* supplies proof; he still clings to his ideal in Fortinbras; and, even at the end of the tragedy, he never suspects the "noble" Laertes of foul play until Laertes himself confesses it. Hamlet is not a Timon grown utterly embittered; but, as the plot unfolds, he is progressively educated in the hard, worldly lessons of suspicion and distrust, and he comes more and more

to value the unswerving loyalty of his new friend Horatio. Hamlet, in short, during the tragedy, grows from a courtier in mere outward form of etiquette and charming manners to a manipulator of the weapons of intrigue. In this, he becomes increasingly resourceful and adroit: for weeks, he could not think of a way to test the guilt of Claudius; but, later in the play, he devises, almost on the instant, the forged dispatch that defeats the mission of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The failure of the King to realize Hamlet's new skill and address seems clearly to contribute to the royal *débâcle* at the end. Nevertheless, Hamlet does not quite attain a thorough grasp of character and motive: even after he has killed Polonius, he still considers him a "wretched, rash, intriguing fool"; he seems never really to understand his mother's self-sacrificing love; and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he hurries to their deaths without for a moment thinking that they were but obeying their duty, and only wished to save him from the consequences of the murder of Polonius. He grows more and more proficient in the technique of court-intrigue; but, to the very end, his insight into complex human nature is faulty and uncertain.

This process of education in the patient arts of diplomacy was particularly exasperating to a man of Hamlet's open, impulsive nature, a young Prince who had always said and done whatever the moment prompted with no necessity to pause and weigh each word and action. He had been a soldier and a man of deeds; and yet he is too just and too much of a Christian to act against Claudius on a bare uncertainty; later in the play, when he is sure of Claudius' guilt, he is guarded and must bide his time until the fencing match sets him before the King with a weapon in his hand. He has learned his lesson in diplomacy, and will not risk an unpropitious time, whatever the strain of waiting. Especially in the soliloquies, Shakespeare expresses Hamlet's boiling impatience at this enforced delay. At the end of his very first soliloquy, he cries out rebelliously: "But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue"; he envies the actors who may give even their fictitious feelings

free expression, whereas the Prince of Denmark "can say nothing," in spite of all the greatness of his cause; and, yet more, he envies Fortinbras and envies the Captain who can express their honorable designs in terms of instant action. This feeling of rebellion under restraint, portrayed in the irritable, nervous "melancholy" of the soliloquies, is aggravated as the play proceeds; and it comprises Shakespeare's chief contribution to the Hamlet of the *Bestrafte Brudermord*. Shakespeare's tragedy is indeed a depiction of frustrated purposes: Claudius is denied the happy married life and the just and tranquil reign for which he damned his soul by committing regicide, for he is driven to injustice and on to violence and finally to his downfall; Polonius gives the efforts of a lifetime and indeed his very life to support a dynasty that even this supreme sacrifice cannot save; Ophelia, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern, would cure a Prince who is not ill and who kills them for their pains; and Gertrude, who gave even her body in marriage for the safety of the realm and of her son, the future hope of Denmark, gains only his misunderstanding and contempt, dies warning him of the poison without hearing a word of kindness from his lips, her only consolation that she was spared the sight of her son's death and a knowledge of the extinction in him of all her hopes. All of these went to their last account without achieving their desires; theirs was an intense, unrelieved tragedy. But Hamlet was more fortunate than they: he died—died violently and, like his father without the last rites of the Church—but he died triumphant in achieving his great purpose. His revenge was done; and Claudius had gone before.

Thus in the *finale*, Hamlet is the one character who gains his ends; but the long five acts of prelude to his accomplishment were indeed to a person of his nature an agonizing purgatory. The natural carefree Hamlet of the college days was clearly of a sanguine humor, as his gay youth,⁷ princely status,⁸ and handsome face and figure,⁹ all declare him; but

⁷ *The Most Excellent Booke of Arcandam*, tr. W. Warde (London, 1592), sig. M 2 r.

⁸ C. Dariot, *Judgement of the Starres* (London, 1598), sig. D 2 v.

⁹ L. Lemnie, *Touchstone of Complexions*, tr. T. Newton (London, 1581), leaf 48 v and 49 r.

this type, as in the case of Romeo¹⁰ and of Orsino,¹¹ was easily subject to love and to melancholy, quite as princes, by a turn of Dame Fortune's wheel, might turn to beggars; and, indeed, "trouble and affection"¹² could readily change the disposition proper to one's birth or age. Thus Shakespeare uses contemporary theories of psychology to express Hamlet's inner growth; and he changes from sanguine to melancholy. His increasing nervous tension is a very index and expression of the increasing tensivity of the tragic conflict. Though the Prince conceals this strain under a Protean mask of feigned insanity, yet his soliloquies, like those of Claudius, reveal his inward bitterness. Even at the commencement of the play, he is far from his wonted genial self; for his father's death and his mother's sudden marriage have cast a cloud over him; and, as the episodes accentuate this strain, we catch fewer and fewer glimpses of the merry Prince of the college days at Wittenberg. Hamlet's initial promise to stay at court and live in the very sight of the marriage that he so bitterly deplores is not calculated to enhance his peace of mind: the contrast between this and former days is all too vividly and constantly before him. The news that an apparition like his father walks abroad troubles him further; and he wonders what it means. He sees the Ghost, speaks to it; and its dreadful message leaves him in a turmoil of horror and of doubt, a doubt lasting over weeks to prey exhaustingly upon the mind. At first he dares confide in no one; but he cannot live with such a thought alone. Daily he sees his mother and Claudius together on the throne; and, day and night, his doubt of the Ghost's message throbs through his brain; day and night, he thinks but cannot act. He dare not tell Gertrude, he dare not tell Ophelia. In fact, he feels that his great task forces him to renounce even his love for her, and they part, and meet again only to quarrel bitterly. Sooner or later, he must confide in

¹⁰ See the present author, "Shakespeare's 'Star-Crossed Lovers,'" *R. E. S.*, about to appear.

¹¹ See the present author, "The Melancholy Duke Orsino," *Bulletin* of the Johns Hopkins Institute of the History of Medicine, about to appear.

¹² Lemnie, *op. cit.*, leaf 92 r and v.

someone, and he tells Horatio, who already knows so much that there seems less added risk in telling him the rest; and Horatio is loyal to his trust.

The Prince's changed demeanor troubles Gertrude and disturbs Claudius. Madness in such high places must not be overlooked; and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are sent for, and suddenly appear home from the university. Hamlet wonders at their coming, and soon discovers that they are prying into the reason for his strange behavior. He feels spied upon. He suffered before from sorrow for his father, bitterness toward his mother and perplexity about the message of the Ghost: now he knows that Claudius suspects, and he feels the immediacy of danger. He puts off his former playmates; but he has no sooner done so than a new peril comes: even Ophelia seems to have lent herself to the purposes of his enemy. His mother, his old playmates, and the girl he loves seem all in league against him; and yet he can do nothing: no wonder his soliloquies are bitter. The players come. He thinks of using *The Murder of Gonzago*; and, in the evening, they give it before the court. The poise of Claudius is wonderful. Hamlet and Horatio watch, and finally Hamlet can endure no more; and he flings into the King's face his knowledge of the crime; and Claudius shows his guilt. The two have exchanged secrets: he now knows Claudius a regicide; but now Claudius knows his knowledge. Hamlet's first reaction is a hectic joy of relief from galling uncertainty; but the relief is short. The prayer-scene follows. Surely there will be other opportunities to kill Claudius, for Polonius still thinks him insane and is willing to "fool" him "to the top of his bent." He goes to his mother's closet, leaving the King alive, and then comes the accidental killing of Polonius: what must have been Hamlet's feelings to raise the arras and find the body, not of the King, but of Ophelia's father; and chagrin at this discovery doubtless lent added harshness to his comment. Then follows the soul-searching dialogue with Gertrude; and then he is put under guard and hurried off to England. What a twenty-four hours' whirlwind of events

after a strain of weeks; and now he is an exile; and who knows how all may end? The last half of the play is a tempest of action beating in upon him. He reads the dispatch, forges the substitute; he fights the pirates, and is taken prisoner, and, by skilfull *coup*, wins them as his allies, and hurries back to Denmark. He meets Horatio; and suddenly, without a syllable of news or preparation, he finds before him the burial procession of Ophelia—Ophelia, whom he loved and had renounced and had not seen since the evening of *The Murder of Gonzago*. This for a moment breaks his poise. What has Laertes suffered to flaunt such "bravery"? And the two wrangle and wrestle over the girl's dead body. Hamlet has been tried, first by weeks of hectic quiet, now in the vortex of swift event; and, like a hero in the *Faerie Queene*, he is at last ready to accomplish his great quest. He has learned much; and Claudius has lost Polonius, his chief ally; and the two antagonists meet one another on more even terms. Osric brings in the invitation to the fencing bout; Hamlet is ashamed of his treatment of Laertes, and, in hopes of making peace with him, accepts. This is the second great effort at conciliation in the tragedy: the first was the play-within-the-play, Hamlet's trap for Claudius, which more than ever roused their enmity; this is the King's final trap for Hamlet into which he walks unknowingly, as Claudius did to *The Murder of Gonzago*. Hamlet is intent upon the match; indeed, he hardly notices his mother die. He is stabbed, and he stabs Laertes, with the poisoned foil; and Laertes, dying, tells him of the plot. Hamlet's interval for action has shrunk to the bare moment he has yet to live. At last in the intrigue, he may, and must, assume the offensive role; and he is nerved to the occasion without uncertainty or pause. He stabs the King, and forces to his lips the poisoned goblet, and then falls back to die.

The strain is never lessened as the tragedy proceeds; sorrow, disillusion, personal danger, apparent perfidy, and the death of those he loved; all this he feels in such ascending climax that for the killing of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern,

he has not even the murmur of regret that he had for old Polonius; and the death of his mother, whom he had so loved, passes without a word. He has run the entire gamut of emotion; and nothing remains. No need of a soliloquy in the final act: he chafes no longer at inactivity; since the play-within-the-play, events have been a whirlwind; and, moreover, his emotions have transcended their expression in mere words. The trying of men's souls is a tremendous thing; and the shock of events stamps itself on personality like dies on molten steel. Beneath layer after layer of habit, the stratified deposit by our former acts and thoughts, beneath layers of deception assumed to protect us from a hostile world, we hide our actual selves, the moods and feelings true to us for the moment. In Claudius, Shakespeare shows the outward shell of an urbane disguise, his appearance to the court and even to Gertrude whom he loved, and underneath, his actual self, a soul torn by remorse. Claudius is a personality in two layers of being, each with its separate traits contrasting with the other. In Hamlet, the master-dramatist depicts a character in three depths;¹³ for he not only gives the Prince's inner self bent by the action of the play, and his outer self exchanging courtesies, making love, or feigning madness, but also his former self before the play began, before his lessons in intrigue had cut his character into two divergent parts. Surely all drama presents no personality more complex than this, three simultaneous Hamlets portrayed reacting on each other and responding in delicate nuances to the stimuli of the kaleidoscopic situations of the play.

Shakespeare's Hamlet then is a perfectly integrated trinity of personalities: the first the soldier-scholar-courtier-lover of his youth, based on the Prince of the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, the second, the exterior personality that he showed the world, assuming a social charm or a flagrant eccentricity to the point of seeming madness; of this Hamlet also, the *Bestrafte Brudermord* gives evidence; but the third Hamlet is entirely Shake-

¹³ Shakespeare had depicted Nym in two planes expressed in two contrasting humors. See the present author, "The Humor of Corporal Nym," *Sh. Bulletin*, XIII, 131 ff.

speare's own, the Hamlet in revolt against the deviousness of his task; the man of action whom events have forced to pause and weigh and wait, who meanwhile sees his world falling about his ears, who strikes at the very root of all he has known and loved because he has come to hate it, but who in the end achieves the one great object for which he gives all else, and by his just revenge at last brings peace to the perturbed spirit of his father: this all-too-human human being, struggling and suffering first in doubtful and enforced inaction, then in a tempest of event—a single man against the whole society of his nation and his time, against his friends, his love, his mother, pursuing his inevitable goal, in sorrow and in bitterness of heart to ultimate catastrophe: such a man the Elizabethans would accept as a tragic hero; such are Brutus, Macbeth, Coriolanus, and Antony; and such is Shakespeare's Hamlet.

CHAPTER XIII

THE PLOT OF *HAMLET*

UNDER THE RULE of King Hamlet and Queen Gertrude, Denmark had waxed powerful. The warlike King seems to have fought the Poles,¹ had levied tribute from England,² and by single combat had gained lands from Norway.³ At home, he was popular; abroad, feared; and, in his family life, he was fortunate in a Queen who deeply loved him⁴ and a son who idolized him. His brother Claudius, however, occupied the disagreeable and anomalous position of a younger son, disregarded or made light of by the court; and being more of a politician than a soldier, he was quite overshadowed in the popular mind by the King's military reputation. Claudius, though of royal blood and feelings, was slighted and even ridiculed.⁵ He was astute and dignified, and naturally resented his position; and, what was worse, he fell desperately in love with the Queen, his brother's wife,⁶ and must have been particularly unhappy to cut so sorry a figure at her court. Personal bitterness, a sense of thwarted ability, high ambition⁷ and, above all, an overwhelming passion for the Queen, all drew him toward the fatal deed that was to prove his ultimate undoing and that of the whole dynasty.

Poison, rather than sword or dagger, was his natural weapon;⁸ and so poignant were his motives that he did not hesitate to prearrange and to carry out a crime that combined fratricide and regicide, two of the worst outrages against the individual, the family, the state, and Almighty God; and, furthermore, he sends his brother to eternal judgment without chance of repentance or of the last rites of the Church.

¹ *Hamlet*, I, i, 62-63.

² *Ibid.*, III, i, 170; V, ii, 41.

³ *Ibid.*, I, i, 61 and 80 ff.

⁴ *Ibid.*, I, ii, 143 ff.; III, iv, 88; *passim*.

Cf. I, ii, 140-141.

⁵ *Ibid.*, II, ii, 346 ff.

⁶ *Ibid.*, III, iii, 54-55; IV, vii, 12 ff.

⁷ *Ibid.*, III, iii, 55.

⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, IV, vii, 160.

Claudius was no weakling to cavil at consequences, once his mind was fixed. He procured a violent poison; and, while the King was taking his customary afternoon nap in his orchard, Claudius stole in upon him, and poured the poison into his ears. So the King died. Everyone supposed that he must have been bitten by a snake; and no one suspected murder. The murderer had chosen his time well: Hamlet was away at a foreign university; and Gertrude seems to have been too overwhelmed with grief to give thought to much beside. Fortinbras, son of the King of Norway whom the Elder Hamlet had slain, took the occasion secretly to raise an army to regain the lands his father lost; and his uncle, who ruled the country as vice-regent, was too old and bedrid to know of the incipient revolt. England also, though still desolate from recent conquest, refused tribute. Thus the death of King Hamlet produced a serious national crisis that demanded instant action.

The succession must be established, and that at once. Denmark, like the old Germanic peoples, was an elective monarchy, the king being chosen usually from a given family: the Elizabethans would easily understand this system, for it still persisted in Poland and in the Holy Roman Empire. There was no time for Hamlet to return from the university; and, moreover, an older, more experienced ruler was required. Claudius was the obvious choice; and, like Henry VII of England, he strengthened his claim by immediately marrying Queen Gertrude, the obvious rival candidate. Of course, the court approved the nuptials, though they were incestuous; for this was the surest way of saving Denmark from revolt and ruin. The Queen also, though apparently she did not love Claudius, and wished that her son might at least have been consulted, and though she shared with her age the horror of incest, nevertheless bowed to political necessity, and silenced her grief and her misgivings to save the nation and the dynasty. Thus the regicide achieved his end, and gained his brother's crown and Queen.

Young Hamlet hurried back from the University of Wit-

tenberg to find the succession already settled, and to find Claudius, whom he had always detested, occupying his father's place on the throne and in the family. Hamlet naturally resented both his new stepfather and his loss of the crown. Claudius, either from policy or choice, attempted conciliation: he loved the Queen, and the Queen doted on Hamlet's very looks; and Hamlet, moreover, was popular at court and with the people. Claudius, therefore, bent every effort to win him to the *status quo*. He publicly declared the Prince his "chiefest courtier," and adopted him as his son and heir; and Hamlet relented sufficiently to heed his mother's request that he remain at court and not return to the university. One suspects that in time, Gertrude and Claudius would have been successful in their diplomatic course, with the shrewd advice of Polonius and the practical help of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet's old play-fellows, whom the King and Queen secretly summoned home from Wittenberg to provide him with diversion. But an unforeseen element spoilt all their plans: the Ghost.

To the Elizabethans, an apparition was an intensely true reality; and, when at the witching hour of twelve on a winter night, the guards before the palace saw a figure like the late King appear before them, they never thought of doubting that it was a bona fide spirit; but, also like true Elizabethans, they did doubt whether it was really a ghost of the King, or a devil sent from hell to impersonate him, and so work evil. Marcellus, one of the guardsmen, knows young Horatio, who has lately returned from the university to pay his respects at the recent funeral; and, on the following midnight, Marcellus brings his learned friend to engage in the dangerous business of addressing the spirit and ascertaining its message and its purpose. Here, as in a Greek tragedy, after a long antecedent action, the play begins. The guard is changed before the palace; Marcellus brings in Horatio, who apparently has pooh-poohed the whole affair. Suddenly, the Ghost appears; and Horatio, after overcoming his astonishment, puts to it the basic question as to its identity; but it stalks away

in silence. The witnesses of this astounding scene speculate again on who the spirit might be: is it really the ghost of the late departed King; and, if so, what is the reason for its coming? Then suddenly, it reappears—only to vanish again, quite as suddenly, at the crowing of the cock. Dawn breaks; and Horatio and his companions separate with a promise of mutual secrecy and the understanding that Prince Hamlet should be told so that he may come and question the apparition.

Claudius and his Prime Minister have just gotten the government of Denmark once more into working order. They send ambassadors to Norway to inform the vice-regent there of young Fortinbras' incipient revolt, so that he may suppress it. Laertes, who like Hamlet and Horatio, had returned home for the funeral and stayed on for the wedding that so quickly followed, asks and receives the royal permission to return to the University of Paris; but Hamlet, at his mother's entreaty, promises to remain at court, where, incidentally, Claudius can keep an eye upon his doings. The dynastic crisis seems to be happily settled; and Hamlet, though with some ill grace and much disgust, seems on the point of accepting a situation that he cannot alter. Then Horatio and the two guardsmen come upon him alone to tell him of the apparition. He vaguely remembers Horatio as a fellow Dane, a poor scholar at the University of Wittenberg; and he greets the other two with casual courtesy. He wonders at seeing Horatio in Elsinore, and asks him why he is not at college. Horatio tells him of the apparition; and, in answer to his repeated questions, assures him and reassures him that it bore the closest resemblance to his father. Hamlet says that he will watch that night with the others. They leave him, and he ruminates on the reason for the apparition's coming. Surely it must be some "foul play"; but, according to his soliloquy, he has no hint of what this "foul play" could be.

The household of Polonius, like that of the Elder Hamlet, was a particularly happy one. According to the patriarchal organization of the ideal Elizabethan family, Polonius, for all his absorption in affairs of state, took time to direct the educa-

tion and the activities of his son and his daughter. As the scene opens, Laertes is taking leave of Ophelia. They promise to exchange letters; and he warns her not to take Hamlet's seeming love for her too seriously: young men, he says, are given to philandering—especially, one may add, in those days of the double standard of morality. Hamlet, moreover, as Crown Prince, must wed according to the dictates of the King, for solid reasons of state and not according to his own mere preference. Laertes has the worldly self-assurance of a sophomore; and Ophelia is very young and very innocent, and feels rather hurt at the blasting of her romance. Just then Polonius enters, gives his son some parting good advice and his blessing, and speeds him off. The final remark of Laertes to Ophelia referring to their recent conversation, reminds Polonius that he also has been informed, perhaps through the official spy-system, that his daughter has been seeing too much of the Crown Prince. Laertes had been rather plain in speech about the matter; Polonius is parentally severe. Certainly Ophelia has no business playing with such fire; and the quicker she breaks off the affair the better for all concerned: she was a little fool to take it seriously anyway. Ophelia, like a good Elizabethan daughter, promises to do as she is told.

Again it is almost midnight on the platform before the palace, and bitter cold as befits a northern latitude. Within, the King is feasting in celebration of Hamlet's promise to remain in Denmark. Outside, Horatio, Marcellus and the Prince keep watch for the apparition. Suddenly, it comes; and Hamlet addresses it in terms appropriate to its dubious identity. It beckons him away; his companions urge him not to follow for fear that, if it be a devil, it may do him harm; but he breaks from them and hurries after it. When the two have gone some distance, the Ghost first speaks. It declares itself to be his father's spirit now confined by day to purgatory; but it provides no actual proof. To Hamlet's astonished ears, it tells the story of the murder, with all its horror of a death unsanctified by the Church. It lays upon Hamlet the obligation of righting this heinous wrong; and, with a final moni-

tion to work no harm to Gertrude, it disappears at the first glow of dawn. Hamlet is overwhelmed, and indeed so utterly carried away by the supernatural presence that, for the moment, all his doubts are stilled as to its identity and truthfulness. Horatio and Marcellus call; he answers; and they shortly come up to him, full of concern for his safety and of questions as to the ghostly revelation. He begins to tell them, then thinks better of it, and, echoed by the Ghost beneath the ground, swears them to secrecy—a secrecy that they maintain to the very conclusion of the play. At the end of the first act, this forms a climax of intense emotionalism, and gives to Hamlet—could he but be sure of the Ghost's identity and message—the clue and motive for revenge against King Claudius.

Following the usual Elizabethan technique of continual variety and contrast, Act II commences in a lower key. Young noblemen, before they started on their careers at court, were regularly given two or three years of study at a university and some chance to travel. Polonius had combined the two for young Laertes; and now he follows the custom of prudent Elizabethan parents, and sends a trusted servitor, Reynaldo, to inquire into his son's doings at the University of Paris. Polonius is far from being straight-laced; but, after all, the young man must not be allowed to form too serious bad habits. Polonius, apparently, gives Laertes his allowance piecemeal; and Reynaldo is to carry him some money, and is also carefully instructed to learn of his way of life by both observation and inquiry. He is hardly dispatched, when Ophelia bursts in upon her father, with a speed and suddenness quite unlike the well-bred Elizabethan daughter that she is. Polonius is taken aback; and she proceeds somewhat breathlessly to explain she has just been scared half out of her wits. As she was sewing in her sitting room, Hamlet had entered in a state of utter disarray, and, after staring her out of countenance, without saying a word, had walked backward out of the room, still staring at her, and so left her. One judges that this was his leave-taking of her and of his youthful love affair, which the problem of the Ghost's commands had obliged

him to discontinue. Polonius, however, very naturally concludes that Hamlet has gone mad for Ophelia's love; and Ophelia agrees with him. Polonius is deeply troubled: to have his daughter fall in love with the Crown Prince was bad enough; but to have the Crown Prince go crazy, as a consequence, is so grave a matter that the King and Queen must be immediately informed.

Meanwhile, Claudius and Gertrude are welcoming Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern, whom they have recalled from Wittenberg to give Hamlet amusement and diversion. The two young men are glad to renew their comradeship with the Prince; and both promise to do their best. As they retire to look for him, Polonius comes in. His task requires delicacy and tact. He prepares the way for his news of the love affair by hinting that he has discovered the cause of Hamlet's lunacy; and then, to put royalty into a still better humor, he ushers in the ambassadors from Norway with their welcome news that Fortinbras will use his troops, not to rebel against Denmark, but to fight the Poles. The King compliments Polonius on his "well-took labour" in achieving this diplomatic victory; and then the difficult part of Polonius' errand begins. He commences with great circumspection, assuring the King and Queen of his high sense of their exalted majesty, and at the same time cajoles them and whets their impatience with a display of wit. Then he tells them that Ophelia, good and proper daughter as she is, has handed him a letter, which, without further explanation, he proceeds to read, letting the Queen herself guess that Hamlet wrote it and that there has been a love affair. Thus, without direct mendacity, he implies that the affair is of but recent origin, and that Ophelia told him of it from the first and of her own accord. Thus he safeguards his daughter from the royal anger. The King, as Polonius doubtless had intended, comes straight to the point: how did Ophelia receive Hamlet's advances? At once, Polonius becomes the image of conscious virtue: does not the King think him faithful and honorable? Of course, as a loyal subject and a prudent father, he quashed the thing immedi-

ately. Surely, it was not his fault, nor yet his daughter's, that Hamlet had become so infatuated as to go insane. Thus the whole story is out; and yet Polonius has lost nothing of royal favor. Strange that his adroit management of this signal crisis in his career should move critics to call him foolish and thick-witted! Gertrude accepts his account of the matter and also his diagnosis of her son's complaint. Claudius, however, whose bad conscience perhaps made him more suspicious, wishes to have further proof. Polonius is a trifle nettled; but his quick resource rises to the occasion; and he suggests that the King overhear a talk between the lovers, and so decide for himself.

All but Polonius go out; and Hamlet enters reading. The Chamberlain addresses him with a proper ceremonious inquiry as to his health, a question that, under the circumstances, is particularly significant. Hamlet answers curtly. Polonius, taken aback by the Prince's unaccustomed brusqueness, asks whether Hamlet knows him; and Hamlet embraces the occasion to prove his lunacy, and calls Polonius a fishmonger—an opprobrious epithet in the *argot* of the day. There follows a dialogue, tactful and decorous on the part of Polonius, cynical and mocking on the part of Hamlet. Just then Rosencrantz and Guildenstern come in, having just found the Prince. Hamlet greets them with delight. How on earth do they happen to return to Denmark just now? They evade the question; but the Prince insists; and so, in the course of the conversation, he guesses that they were sent for. This rouses his suspicion, and by degrees his manner toward them changes. They lead the talk to his melancholy and his ambition, but learn nothing very clearly, for Hamlet merely gives vent to his bitterness against the world in general. As such depressing topics, however, are against the main purpose of their visit, Rosencrantz, by way of diversion, tells Hamlet of the coming of the actors. He is delighted; and, his suspicions momentarily forgotten, the three exchange the theatrical gossip of Wittenberg. Then Polonius appears with his fine speech announcing the players, which Hamlet takes delight in spoiling; and then

the players themselves troop in. Hamlet greets them most graciously, and at once demands a declamation. Polonius criticizes it as too long and the diction as too quaint; but Hamlet is so pleased that he commands the best accommodations for the company, and orders a play for the night following. As the actors withdraw, he calls back their leader, and asks him whether they can perform *The Murder of Gonzago*, with the addition of a few lines that Hamlet himself will write. Thus, even while the King is preparing to test his sanity and its causes, Hamlet is preparing to test the truth of the Ghost's message and the culpability of the King.

Hamlet is alone. He has been under great emotional constraint, acting a part before the court to conceal his terrible suspicions. The actor's declamation has made his nerves even tenser and has increased what the Elizabethans would call his "melancholy." His thoughts race back and forth, sometimes on the generalities of life, sometimes on the problem that lies before him: how impassioned the actor was! He even shed real tears. Indeed, Hamlet himself, faced with a frightful problem, can give no such outlet to his feelings in word or action or any visible emotion. Is not this interminable waiting the mere result of cowardice? Can he really do nothing? But perhaps the apparition was indeed only a devil come to tempt him to the mortal sin of regicide. The devil is very powerful with "melancholy" people. The play must be the test: surely it will prove whether the conscience of Claudius is that of a murderer or no.

Act III, like the second act, begins in a lower key. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are puzzled—or at least they pretend to be so, when the King asks them for their first report on Hamlet's case. The Queen, who has doubtless heard of his rudeness to Polonius, asks whether he received them politely; and, on their replying that he did, she questions them about his attitude toward amusements. They mention the players; and Polonius tells the King and Queen that Hamlet has invited them to witness the performance. Claudius is delighted—a subtle touch of irony that he should so willingly embrace

the occasion of his own undoing. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern retire; and Gertrude intimates that she would be quite willing that Ophelia and Hamlet marry if he could be cured. The scene is then set for the test of Hamlet's madness. Ophelia is to walk up and down reading in a gallery that the Prince frequents; and Polonius and the King go into hiding.

Hamlet comes in, still keyed up nervously, his mind still racing from one thing to another more or less related to the affairs in hand: what should one think of suicide as a relief from earthly ills? is it nobler to face the odds of life or stoically to end all sorrows in a self-imposed eternal slumber? Such a solution would be easy—and yet, what of the after-life? Because of that, if for nothing else, men must suffer patiently. Thus Christian morality, by forbidding us to take our own lives, makes us cowards according to natural, human standards; and, instead of one quick final act, we remain alive, a prey to uncertainties. Just then, Ophelia enters; and her appealing innocence sweeps Hamlet's melancholy away; and, in a swift aside, he wishes that she may pray for all his sins.

Ophelia gives him formal greeting; and he replies with rather more self-abasement than mere courtliness required. She takes the occasion to return to him his gifts; and, though he tries to avoid accepting them, she insists upon it, and implies that he has been "unkind." So starts a lovers' quarrel. Hamlet hardly knows what to make of her sudden and unexplained withdrawal from their previous intimacy; Ophelia is constrained and deeply hurt when he questions whether she is "honest" and "fair." His cynicism seems insulting, and her answers grow briefer, as if she did not know what to say; and finally her asides show that she thinks him utterly insane. Perhaps as they talk, Hamlet catches a glimpse of Polonius in hiding, and suddenly he asks her: "Where's your father?" Of course, she answers with a lie: would not one lie to cure one's Prince and lover of insanity? He knows it is a lie; he flings an insult at Polonius, turns upon Ophelia with one more vitriolic speech, and quits the room. Ophelia is overcome with pain and pity of his condition, and utters the famous eulogy,

almost an epitaph, on the great and fascinating personality that she has so admired and loved, and now sees so greatly changed. Claudius and Polonius come out upon the stage. Claudius is puzzled and still unconvinced. He doubts whether Hamlet is insane, and announces that he will solve the situation by sending the Prince to England to collect the arrears of tribute. Polonius, one suspects, would rather keep him in Denmark, where he can be watched; but the tactful minister knows better than to oppose the King, and suggests instead that, since Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Ophelia have proved useless as instruments in solving the enigma, that Gertrude have a private talk with Hamlet, and see what she can learn. So ends the scene with the Prince still uncertain as to the guilt of Claudius, and Claudius increasingly uncertain of the insanity of the Prince.

Meanwhile, the plans for the play go on apace. Hamlet directs the actors himself; and Polonius brings word that the King and Queen are graciously pleased to attend. They have all gone off to make ready for the performance. Hamlet calls Horatio. The two have apparently seen much of one another off-stage during the second act; for now Hamlet addresses Horatio with "thee" and "thou," and pronounces a eulogy on his character that praises the very traits that he thinks wanting in his old comrades, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: Horatio is honest, steadfast, and, above all, poised and restrained, traits that in his melancholy the Prince has come to value. He has told Horatio everything; and now he explains to him the device of the play, which will present a murder such as the Ghost described; and he urges Horatio to watch the King for any sign of guilt. Horatio promises; and, as royalty comes in, the two separate as if they had not been talking. Claudius is graciousness itself: he asks Hamlet after his health, and Hamlet answers with a puzzling irony that may be rudeness or insanity. Claudius tactfully takes it for the latter. In like manner, Hamlet engages in raillery with Polonius: he must convince the court that he is mad; and the easiest way to do it seems to be by counterfeiting an unwonted

boorishness. The Queen invites him to sit by her; but he prefers to lie at Ophelia's feet, where he can watch the King; and, to perfect his role of madness, he indulges in such bawdy small talk as even an Elizabethan girl would not permit, and Ophelia properly rebukes him.

The play starts with a pantomime that enacts the poisoning scene. Ophelia asks what it signifies; but Hamlet evades her question. Then comes the prologue. *The Murder of Gonzago* seems to us an artificial affair, indeed, but this must be so if its reality bear true proportion to the reality of the intermingled comments of the audience. The Player-Queen protests her love for her first husband; and the Player-King prepares for his siesta. Gertrude remarks on the play, apparently quite unconcerned: she had no part in the regicide, and so would miss the point. But Claudius uneasily inquires whether Hamlet is sure that there is nothing offensive in the plot. The Prince sardonically replies that the story is an old one, and so cannot have any timely point; and the King, with admirable self-control, accepts an ordeal that he cannot well escape. Enter the nephew of the Player-King. He speaks an appropriately murderous piece, and pours the poison into his uncle's ear. Hamlet can endure the strain no longer. The stony calm of Claudius exasperates him; and he flings into his uncle's teeth the essence of the story. For Claudius, this is quite too much, or perhaps it is just a chance to escape. He rises; the Queen is alarmed and surprised. He cries for lights, and then hurries from the hall, followed by the court. At last the two protagonists know where each other stand: Hamlet knows Claudius for a regicide; and Claudius knows that Hamlet knows. The preliminaries are over, and the struggle *à l'outrance* is under way.

Hamlet's first reaction is sheer delight; and, like a true lover of the stage, he gives vent to his feelings in declamation. Horatio confirms his impression: certainly the King is guilty; the Ghost is an honest ghost and not a devil, what he said is true. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern come in, with a warning that the King is very angry and with orders from the Queen

that Hamlet is to attend her in her private chamber. The Prince is too excited to reply to them at once, and, furthermore, he wants to mystify them with his pretended lunacy. He is thoroughly convinced that they are his uncle's spies, and is deeply embittered that they have deserted him apparently for a mere matter of court-advancement. On their side, they wish only to cure his malady; and Rosencrantz especially is hurt at his growing coldness. Polonius enters to hurry Hamlet to his mother. The Prince replies to him most rudely, in an effort to discover whether he still thinks him mad; and, finding that he does, Hamlet says that he will come at once; and so they leave him. In a soliloquy, he reminds us that it is midnight, and that, when he sees his mother, he must not harm her. Thus ends the crucial scene of the play, in a mood quiet but foreboding. The first act gave Hamlet the Ghost's message; the second act shows him breaking with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and Ophelia—with all his former life. Claudius has failed to make him accept contentedly the *status quo*. The third act has shown his new intimacy with Horatio, a different sort of friend, and a friendship on a different plane, and has given both to the Prince and to the King a knowledge of the true relation in which they stand. The so-called rising action of the play is perfect; and Shakespeare emphasizes just the things that according to the present interpretation he ought to emphasize.

Claudius is determined to act quickly: Hamlet must go at once to England. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern gladly assume charge of him during the voyage, and carry the King's private message to his government in England. There is no reason to suppose that they have any idea that this message imports the immediate death of Hamlet. Polonius informs the King that Hamlet is on the way to his mother's chamber; and then the King is left alone. Claudius, though indeed a murderer, is intensely sincere and honest with himself. His sense of guilt gives him no inward peace; and he longs for the quiet conscience of forgiven sin: but how can sin be forgiven without confession and restitution; and he cannot bring

himself to give up his crown, with all it means to his ambitious nature, or give up Gertrude, with whom he is infatuated. Can there be heavenly mercy or repentance in such a case? Before retiring for the night, he kneels to ask forgiveness. Just then Hamlet goes through the room on his way to Gertrude's chamber. He sees the King, and pauses. Should he kill him? Surely not! To kill him at prayer would send his soul to heaven; whereas the Elder Hamlet was cut off without chance of making his peace with God. No. Another opportunity will come. So Hamlet passes on. Claudius rises; and, with poignant dramatic irony, he says that he still feels his prayers unanswered.

Polonius is in Gertrude's private chamber, urging her to speak strongly to her son. Hamlet calls without. Polonius hides himself; and Hamlet enters. He at once proceeds to dominate the situation in a way that neither Gertrude nor Polonius had expected. The Queen, indeed, is inclined to think that he is raving, and asks him whether he recognizes her; and he replies with an insulting reference to her recent incestuous marriage. She is angry, and threatens to turn him over to more severe questioners. He forces her into a chair; she screams, echoed by Polonius. Mistaking him behind the arras for the King, Hamlet stabs him to death; but even the killing of the Chamberlain cannot divert the Prince from his purpose of settling matters once and for all between himself and his mother. At first she asks what she has done that is so bad; but soon she succumbs to his bitter reproaches. How could the beloved wife of a man like Hamlet's father descend to a marriage with such as Claudius! Hamlet is at a loss to explain it. Was she so blind? At her age, surely it was not passion. Gertrude seems quite won over, and is bitterly repentant. Just then, at midnight appears the Ghost. Hamlet sees it, but it is invisible and inaudible to his mother, quite in the way of Elizabethan spirits, Banquo's ghost for example. Gertrude hears Hamlet talking, apparently with the empty air: indeed, he must be mad; and, reading her thoughts, Hamlet realizes that, unless he convinces her that he is sane, all their previous

talk will go for naught. He offers her such proofs as he can, and she seems convinced. He regains his ascendancy over her; and she promises no longer to act the part of wife to Claudius, and, above all, to keep the secret that Hamlet's madness is only feigned. The Prince goes out, dragging behind him the body of Polonius. Again he has won his point, and in his mother has a new ally; but the death of Polonius has weakened the forces of compromise; and the struggle between uncle and nephew hastens toward its crisis. So ends the third act of the play, an act containing four scenes among the most poignant in all dramatic art. Hamlet has learned of Claudius' guilt; and he has convinced Gertrude of the evil of her marriage; but, to accomplish these advances, he has shown Claudius that he knows him for a murderer; and, by killing Polonius, he has put a weapon into Claudius' hands.

Act IV commences with the King still seeking information. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern either cannot, or will not, tell him anything significant; and Gertrude conceals the nature of her recent talk by merely saying that Hamlet is obviously insane. The death of Polonius gives added excuse for sending the Prince to England; but it greatly embarrasses the King, who loses a shrewd counsellor. Hamlet seems crazier than ever; and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have great difficulty persuading him to tell them where the body is. The Prince is under close surveillance. He sees Claudius once more before embarking, but has no chance to kill him. As he is about to go abroad, he comes upon a captain of Fortinbras' army, which is crossing Denmark to fight the Poles. The war is being waged for a meager patch of soil; but, as Norway's honor is involved, Fortinbras and his men do not hesitate to risk their lives. This quixotism stirs Hamlet to reflection on his own problem of honor, the revenge of his father's death. Perhaps he should not have been so scrupulous in testing the truth of the Ghost's message. Like any man caught in the intricacy of dubious events, he looks before and after, and questions his own actions. One thing is sure: now that he

knows the guilt of Claudius, his every effort must be bent on blood-revenge.

The death of Polonius deeply shook the court and government. The King had his body secretly interred; but, instead of silencing gossip, this served only to increase it. Unfortunately, moreover, the shock made poor Ophelia go insane; and Laertes secretly returns from Paris. Ophelia is deeply pathetic in her lunacy, and talks incoherently but in a way that rouses suspicion against Claudius, who had never been popular. Polonius, on the contrary, must have had a name to conjure with in Denmark; and young Laertes on his return finds plenty of followers who would urge him even to usurp the crown. He has no definite political plan; but he leads his mob against the palace; and even the King's Swiss bodyguard cannot stop him. Thus Claudius and Gertrude must face his insurrection with no other weapon than unsupported diplomacy and the divine prestige inherent in Renaissance royalty. Laertes rushes in, and demands his father. Gertrude takes the first brunt of his anger; and Claudius, through his very kingly presence, quiets Laertes, and persuades him to hear reason. Just then, the mad Ophelia wanders in, with herbs and flowers that she has pulled. Contemporary folklore gave allegorical meanings to common flowers; and Ophelia, with unwitting irony, offers to the King and Queen and court, the symbols of thought and remembrance. Laertes is distracted with his grief; but, by a master-stroke of diplomacy, the King still calms him, and promises full satisfaction.

Meanwhile, Horatio receives a letter that some pirates had attacked Hamlet's ship, and then set him free; and he is returning to the capital. Hamlet encloses a message for the King, which Horatio sends on. Claudius has successfully convinced Laertes that he is innocent and that Hamlet is guilty of Polonius' death; and all of Laertes' anger turns on Hamlet. Just then arrives the Prince's message that he is back in Denmark. What can this mean? In any event, Laertes is glad; for it gives him the immediate chance for revenge that his hot

nature craves. Here is an instrument to the King's very hand. Why not a fencing match between the two? If Laertes really loved his father, he could revenge his murder, and the world be none the wiser. Laertes, filled with anger, falls in with the plan, and suggests the poisoned foil. If this should fail, moreover, Claudius will prepare a poisoned cup. Before the young man can repent of his promised treachery, the Queen comes in to tell that Ophelia has fallen into a stream and so been drowned. This is indeed too much for poor Laertes, and he bursts from the royal presence to hide his unmanly tears. The Queen knows nothing of their plot; and Claudius, realizing her deep love for Hamlet, does not tell her.

Since Act IV, unlike most Elizabethan tragedy, has in it little or nothing of the comic, Shakespeare introduces something of the sort at the beginning of Act V. The gravediggers discuss Ophelia's death and burial, and exchange clownish witticisms. Hamlet and Horatio appear; and Hamlet joins his bitter wit to theirs, and moralizes on life and death. The unexpected entrance of Ophelia's funeral train stops his discourse. Hamlet is puzzled: who can have died that the King and Queen and all the court are mourning? The Priest refuses to go further with the rites; for, after all, Ophelia's death was something rather close to suicide; and suicides should have no Christian burial. Such a pronouncement rouses Laertes to a fury. He leaps into the grave, and bids the gravediggers pile earth in mountains on him. The grave then is Ophelia's! At this new shock, Hamlet's jangled nerves almost give way. He also leaps into the grave; and brother and lover grapple over the dead girl's body. Attendants separate the two. Claudius privately urges Laertes to be patient, and advises Gertrude to keep an eye upon her son. The King has the lines of intrigue altogether in his hands; and everything is ready for the *coup*.

The last scene of the play opens with Horatio and Hamlet in conversation once again. Hamlet tells him how he opened and read the dispatch that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were carrying to England and how he inserted their names

for his own so that they would be killed on their arrival. The Prince's bitterness against Claudius again flares up; but he has no clear plan of attack. He regrets the hasty quarrel with Laertes, and hopes to make it up when next they meet—a fine ironic touch. Just then, Osric comes in to announce Laertes' challenge to the fencing match and the King's wager on Hamlet's swordsmanship. Hamlet supplies another scene of comic relief by ridiculing Osric's Italianate affectations; and, finally, though Horatio warns him against the challenge, Hamlet accepts it; and, in due course, royalty and the court troop in. Hamlet apologizes to Laertes for his actions at Ophelia's grave; but Laertes, full of vengeful purpose, is cold and evasive. Osric brings in the foils, and the fencing starts. Claudius orders wine for Hamlet, the poisoned cup; but Hamlet says that he will drink later on. The sword-play recommences, and Laertes is twice touched. Gertrude picks up the goblet of poisoned wine; the King cries out a warning; but she drinks. The third bout now begins; and Laertes touches Hamlet. Then, in the scuffle, they change swords; and Hamlet wounds Laertes. They are parted; but Laertes is dying. Gertrude faints from the poison, and cries out. The King says that she swoons merely at the sight of blood; but the dying Laertes directly charges him with treachery. Hamlet at last finds his opportunity, and stabs the King. Laertes asks forgiveness and so dies. Horatio, overcome with horror, tries to kill himself; but Hamlet begs him to remain alive so that a true account of all that has transpired may be told. As Hamlet dies, young Fortinbras comes in, and the ambassadors from England; and Hamlet casts his vote for Fortinbras' succession to the crown. The ambassadors tell of the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as Hamlet had arranged; and Fortinbras assumes the power, and commands for the Prince appropriate funeral rites.

Such a plot, though far more intricate and less intensely concentrated, is nevertheless essentially that of a Greek tragedy. As in *Oedipus*, the antecedent action, the murder of King Hamlet, determines the main episodes, and makes in-

evitable their outcome. The ordering of the plot, moreover, follows Greek dramaturgy: protasis, epitasis, catastasis, and catastrophe. The catastasis, or counter-turn, bisects the tragedy: in the first part, Hamlet is told, but doubts, the message of the Ghost; in the second, he believes, but cannot execute it, until, in the final catastrophe, he manages to take the King's life, as his own is ebbing from him. Thus the play falls into two approximately equal parts of ascending and descending action. The dividing scene is of course the play-within-the-play, which proves to Hamlet the guilt of Claudius and to Claudius the dangerous knowledge that his stepson has.

Each of these parts in turn is subdivided into a series of graduations rising to a higher and higher climax. The protasis takes up Act I. The Ghost reveals itself to the soldiers; they bring in Horatio; he in turn brings Hamlet; and finally it speaks to Hamlet quite alone. The rest of the first act is given to an explanation of the rather complex antecedent action, to a depiction of the court, to a sketch of the household of Polonius and to Ophelia's imprudent love affair. In Act II, the King tries to probe the cause of Hamlet's seeming madness; and Hamlet prepares to test the apparition's word. Rosenkrantz, Guildenstern, and Ophelia seem to desert him; for he mistakes their efforts to cure his madness for an attempt to spy upon him. Only the humble Horatio rings true. In Act III, the play-scene gives Hamlet certainty; but, in so doing, it reveals his knowledge to the King. He spares the King at prayer; for such a death, he reasons, would be no revenge. Surely another chance will shortly come; and, when he kills Polonius, he thinks he has done the deed; but the death of Polonius, instead of resolving his problem, only plays into the hands of Claudius by supplying an excuse to hurry the Prince off to England. Thus, though the closet-scene seems to win Gertrude to her son as an ally, it gives the King an immediate means of safeguarding his own life. But Hamlet is no sooner gone than a new danger confronts Claudius. Laertes returns secretly from Paris; and the people hail him king. No sooner does Claudius bring him to accept his father's and then his

sister's deaths, than Hamlet himself mysteriously comes back. Claudius shrewdly pits his two enemies against each other. He arranges the fencing bout, and persuades Laertes to fall in with his plans. Hamlet again enters the trap prepared for him; but, as it closes in, the Prince drags also to destruction Laertes, Gertrude, and the King himself. Thus comes a swift and general catastrophe.

The first half of the play then, in the main, consists of Hamlet's learning the Ghost's message and testing its validity; and the second consists of his efforts to carry that message to its logical effect. In the first half, he evades the King's friendship; in the second half, his enmity. Between these two men, it is a duel to the death of sharp and crafty intrigue, constantly growing sharper as the issues are revealed to each; and in the fashion of the Renaissance, any resource that came to hand, poison or treachery, youthful *camaraderie*, or even a mother's love, became for the nonce, mere instruments in the opponents' hands. It is the tragedy of a court-revolution and its consequences, outwardly expressed in the smooth, deceptive idiom of courtly elegance and etiquette. This polished garb deceives us naïve moderns into ignoring the deadly inward nature of the feud; and some have even thought that Hamlet, because he tested his evidence and waited for his time like a true diplomat, was therefore weak and will-less. But in Renaissance society, dominated by prestige and intrigue, hasty and abortive actions, like those of the Earl of Essex and of Laertes, were very liable to go astray. The age of nonchalant and nondescript violence was disappearing—at least violence as an effective weapon in the state—for the kings of England had no money for a standing army, and feudal knights were unreliable and of little military use. Hamlet is conceived of in this new diplomatic age, an age of questioning motives, testing proofs and waiting opportunity, the age of Thomas Cromwell and the Cecils, not of knight-errantry. Oddly enough, because in this respect the tragedy is so modern, we moderns refuse to understand it; or perhaps

we are less modern, less intricate and complex, than was the Renaissance.

The plot of Hamlet then is not the struggle of an individual will against its own weakness, but rather the slow maturing efforts of one who against his will must bide his time, of one who will not strike without due evidence, and who is too shrewd to risk his all upon a dubious occasion. If then the struggle is, not the effort of a diseased mind to overcome its malady, but the conflict between the King and the Crown Prince, then the episodes fall into place; the plot has a beginning that sets forth the situation, a middle that intensifies it, and an end that brings it to rest in tragic catastrophe. The dialogue emphasizes the changes in the situation as they occur; and the major scenes coincide with the crises in the plot: according to this interpretation, the great dramatic scene of the play-within-the-play is logically the crux of the tragedy. The great scene in Gertrude's closet is Hamlet's crucial effort to detach from Claudius the Queen, his chief ally, but at the cost of Polonius' death and the Prince's immediate banishment. Hamlet counters this banishment by changing the dispatches of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and by returning at once to Denmark. Claudius in turn meets this by his plot with Laertes; and the catastrophe follows as a direct consequence, not of Hamlet's conquest over his melancholy—he was never more melancholy than in the final scenes!—but as a result of the preceding elements of the court-intrigue: the death of Polonius and of Ophelia which so aroused Laertes, the play-scene which had showed to both Claudius and Hamlet the issues drawn between them, and originally the regicide of Hamlet's father before the play began, which brought about these desperate issues, and initiated the conflict of which the plot is the inevitable consequence.

CHAPTER XIV

THE SETTING, STYLE, AND THEME OF THE TRAGEDY

EACH OF THE fine arts expresses itself in terms of one or more physical media; and each aspect of these media may be termed an aesthetic element. Music, for example, uses sound waves, and so has rhythm and melody; and, if more than one sound occurs at once, it has also harmony. Painting has such aesthetic elements as light-and-shade, color, and composition. Drama, being an art of many simultaneous sense-impressions that appeal at once to ear and eye, has many elements. By its Greek etymology, it is the art of *doing*; and a *doing* implies a doer, a place where the thing is done, and some kind of significance inherent in the deed. The *doing*, consisting of one or more episodes in causal relationship, constitutes the plot; the doer, together with his helpers and opponents, requires more or less characterization to justify and explain the things they do; events cannot take place in a vacuum, nor can actions be understood without some knowledge of their appropriate milieu, and this is setting; the actors are almost sure to speak in some more or less characteristic style; and the interrelation of the whole cannot avoid either illustrating, or running counter to, the interrelationship of such people in such a setting and such circumstances, in real life. Thus drama has as its elements, plot, character, setting, style, and theme. The theme constitutes the major significance of the play, the regards in which it reflects some fundamental principles of life; and the greater the play, the more of these principles are reflected in their complex interactions and the deeper and more serene the insight that they portray; for a supreme artist must "see life steadily and see it whole."

The foregoing chapters have surveyed in some detail the characters and plot of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*; and they have

reviewed the delicate liaison between actions and traits of character in all its marvellously complex consistency; for, indeed, the only notable inconsistency in the play that the present writer finds is the question of the hero's age. The setting also is obviously consistent with the delicate intrigue of plot and the finesse of the characterization. A tragedy of elemental passion like *King Lear*, Shakespeare left in the barbaric atmosphere of early Britain, when one swore by the sun and the moon and the natural elements rather than a good round Christian oath; but a drama of diplomacy and intrigue such as *Hamlet* demanded the sophisticated setting of a contemporary Renaissance court. A Renaissance court was the natural habitat of such figures, royal, military, and diplomatic; and into one of these three categories, all the major characters except Ophelia and Horatio belong; and Ophelia is a Renaissance young lady, and Horatio, a young Renaissance Humanist. A Renaissance court was the natural background for just such a tissue of intrigue: a palace-revolution ushers in the tragedy; and a palace-revolution is its catastrophe. Before our eyes, both foreign and domestic politics are transacted; and we see the reactions of the military and the clergy and the common people. This is quite different from *Macbeth* in which war and the clash of arms determine the action and dominate the stage. *Hamlet* is a microcosm of the Renaissance state and of Renaissance society. It is a national tragedy—quite as much as the *Iliad* is a national epic—centered, as everything must be centered in the Renaissance, at court.

Thus Shakespeare changed the play from the crude barbarism of the *Bestrafte Brudermord* to the comparative culture of the Elizabethan age; and this change is obvious, not only in the general conceptions but in innumerable details. Hamlet writes his memoranda on the "tables" of a Renaissance gentleman;¹ he and Laertes, and Polonius before them, enjoy a university education rather than mere feudal training in courtesy and arms; and they fight in the latest Elizabethan

¹ See L. B. Wright, *Middle-Class Culture in Elizabethan England* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1935), p. 147.

fashion, with dagger and rapier;² the Prince writes Ophelia in the artificial love poetry of the age; and they both quote from contemporary songs and broadside ballads. Hamlet and Horatio are up on the latest theories of demonology; most of the characters—Hamlet, Claudius, Laertes, Polonius, Horatio, and probably Marcellus, Bernardo, and Francisco—have traveled widely; Polonius knows Plautus and Seneca, and in his youth acted the part of Brutus: would one expect any character in *Lear* or *Macbeth* to refer to Plautus or to Julius Caesar? Every one, moreover, in true Elizabethan fashion welcomes the actors, who give plays on classical and Italian themes. The lines of *Hamlet* are full of incidental allusions to obviously contemporary things and customs, a “periwig,” “sallets,” the “posy for a ring,” and even bits of ephemeral slang such as “Buz, buz” and perhaps “fishmonger.” Indeed, the detail of *Hamlet* is as typically Renaissance as that of *Twelfth Night* or *Much Ado*, and shows on the part of Shakespeare not the least effort to follow the conditions or the local color of its period in Danish history. This is very different from *Antony and Cleopatra*, in which Shakespeare carefully avoids elements that seemed to him unclassical, and carefully builds up the local color of ancient Egypt not only from details in Plutarch but also from the Bible and every other source that lay at hand.³ It is very different from *Macbeth* in which he took pains to borrow every distinctive touch that Holinshed supplied of contemporary Scottish things and Scottish culture.⁴ *Macbeth* has no such Classical Renaissance names as Horatio and Laertes; and Shakespeare’s use of them in *Hamlet* shows that he did not conceive the play in its historic setting. In *Macbeth*, which he does try to place in its authentic background, he has searched Holinshed for names of places and of people; and his text copies even Holinshed’s peculiarities of spelling.

² See A. S. Wilson, “The Duello in Shakespeare,” *Anglia*, about to appear.

³ See the present author, “The Realism of Shakespeare’s Roman Plays,” *St. Phil.*, XXX, 225 ff.

⁴ See the present author, “Historic Local Color in *Macbeth*,” *Revue Belge*, about to appear.

Thus Shakespeare changed the period of *Hamlet* to his own time from the Dark Ages of Belleforest and the *Bestrafte Brudermord*; and he ignores the local color of chronology; but, to the local color of geography, he pays some heed; and the play contains some touches that an Elizabethan would look upon as typically Danish. Obviously, some such elements came down to him through his sources from the early chronicles of Denmark; and the "tribute" from England and the "election" of a king belong to Elsinore rather than to London. An even surer index of Shakespeare's purpose, and perhaps more obvious to his audience, were such touches as the "bitter cold" of the northern climate, and the heavy drinking, both of which Elizabethans associated with Denmark, and both of which he introduced early in the play, as he did similar touches in *Macbeth*, to establish his local color. The previous dramas of Shakespeare, though they may, like *Hamlet*, show some sense of national local color, have, again like *Hamlet*, comparatively little sense of historic cultural change; and indeed, Jonson's *Sejanus* probably introduced historic local color on the Elizabethan stage; and *Hamlet* almost certainly antedates *Sejanus*. Moreover, historic local color, in an age without reference books and public libraries, would have been difficult to achieve. *Hamlet* then has some authenticity of place but none of time; and this is perhaps fortunate; for the delicate finesse of character and action demanded a setting in the Renaissance, when the spoken word and the pen had become mightier than spear and sword and when passion and motive expressed themselves in forms more subtle than barbaric action. Victorian critics have interpreted the Prince of Denmark in their own image, two centuries too late; but—curious irony!—they have made Claudius, so far as they give him any truth to life, a crude and barbarous potentate five hundred years too early. The whole play belongs in the Renaissance, and only in the Renaissance: the characters are Renaissance types in thought and action; and the intrigue of the drama—"intrigue" in both its meanings—belongs to the

age of Machiavelli and Thomas Cromwell and Queen Elizabeth.

The style of the tragedy also is happily attuned to plot, character, and setting. The emotional pitch of each passing situation is expressed in lyric outburst or in sweeping dialogue or in sparkling, bitter comedy. Both the personality of a character and his social class appear in the very metaphors and turns of speech he uses; and the setting whether before the full court or in the intimacy of a private chamber, is reflected in such nice formalities as the use of the pronouns of address and of honorific titles. The style of the play, indeed, is not alone great poetry, but great poetry subtly modulated to the occasion, to the speaker's immediate feelings and purposes, and to the surroundings in which he speaks: in the Renaissance, with its stringent laws of etiquette, conversation, to be real, could not be otherwise. This fine modulation of the style constitutes one of the chief superiorities of Shakespeare over the lyrical dramas of the Romantic movement, in which the turns of speech reflect the author's poetic power rather than the character who speaks. In the plays of Shakespeare, these matters of style and setting must all fit into any valid interpretation; and the present study has not neglected them in weighing the evidence on each character. Indeed, the style, no less than the setting, though in a more subtle way, is typically Renaissance: its complex and sometimes precious rhetoric reflects the convolved and intricate felicities that the age of Elizabeth admired, the poetic flourishes of the contemporary sonnet, the wealth of alliteration and metaphor and allusion apparent in Euphuism, and the ubiquitous word-play of contemporary comedy.⁵ The characters of *Macbeth* and *Lear*, although more passionate, speak in a simpler manner, as befits a primeval age. The dialogue of *Hamlet* flows in the graceful, complex idiom of the more civilized Renaissance.

A great drama, illustrating as it must, many truths of life in its various characters and situations, is a compound of many

⁵ This change between *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* seems to be partly ascribable to the influence of the new King, James I. See the present author, "King James and Shakespeare's Literary Style," *Archiv Neu. Sp.*, CLXXI, 36 ff.

themes, some merely touched upon, some set forth at length and in detail; but, if the play have the unity essential to serious artistic work, one theme should predominate with its attendant corollaries. *Hamlet* has many minor themes: the career of Claudius, like that of Macbeth, shows how inescapable are the consequences of sin, and how good will not come out of evil while the sinner still enjoys the fruits of his misdeeds. This is a great tragic theme; but, in *Hamlet*, it is only secondary; for Claudius is not the hero, and many of the important scenes and episodes are related to it only very indirectly. Queen Gertrude, like Brabantio in *Othello*, illustrates the pathetic futility of a parent's love; but the relations of Hamlet and his mother do not furnish the main subject of the play. Hamlet himself suggests that Fate governed the career of Polonius—"heaven hath willed it so"—and indeed, his career, like that of his children and of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern seems to present the same ironic theme as that of *Oedipus*, the pursuit of seeming duty that leads, because of ignorance, to ruin; but *Hamlet* on the whole is not a drama of blind Fate; for both the protagonists soon learn the issues of the struggle. Even minor figures, moreover, illustrate fundamental truths; and the Priest at Ophelia's grave reflects the struggle between Church and State that dominated Bale's *King Johan*. The theme of conflicting loyalties lies behind much of the play: loyalty to the Elder Hamlet apparent in his son, in Horatio, and to some degree in Gertrude; loyalty to Claudius apparent in Polonius and the court. Such a theme is very Renaissance; but, in *Hamlet*, it seems to be only incidental; for most of the characters live and die quite unconscious of any conflict between loyalty to the Prince and to the King; and Gertrude is the only figure who feels such a conflict deeply within herself. Thus the play, more or less incidentally, illustrates many current themes, political, religious, social, and ethical.

Tragedy is a specialized and limited type in the several categories of dramatic art; and not every sort of theme is proper to its use. The theme of tragedy should have at once

pathos, that is emotional appeal, and *ethos*, that is significance and insight into life; and only themes that possess both in a high degree are proper in such drama. The futility of mother-love, for instance, is deeply pathetic; but, as worked out in the person of Queen Gertrude, has little general meaning; for love is not necessarily futile, nor does the futility of Gertrude's love for Hamlet illustrate any fundamental truth. Such themes, emotional but lacking in intellectual meaning, may be stuff for farce or melodrama, not high tragedy. On the other hand, the struggle between Church and State apparent at Ophelia's obsequies, is intellectual enough to serve for whole debates, for it involves divergence of theory and policy in two great social institutions; but, even in Elizabethan times, the exact definition of suicide and the consequent question as to Christian burial would hardly arouse enough emotion in the average individual to make it tragic material: such subjects belong rather to the problem play. Thus the theme of a great tragedy involving the major actions of the hero, should be such as arouse the emotions of the audience and at the same time present to their intellects significant principles of life.

The hero of Shakespeare's play is Hamlet, Prince of Denmark; and one's interpretation of the Prince is fundamental in determining the theme of the drama. The nineteenth century, neglecting as it did the relation of Shakespeare's plays to Elizabethan life, generally interpreted their significance in terms of its own ethical generalities, a dubious and unfortunate procedure; and, in the case of *Hamlet*, its attitude toward the major role precluded any complete, or universal, or even Renaissance, interpretation of the play. The Hamlet of the Romantic critics is too weak to illustrate the heroic virtues and generally too abnormal to illustrate the struggles of average humanity. Sir E. K. Chambers, interpreting the Prince as a hesitant visionary, makes the theme of the play, "The ineffectiveness of the speculative intellect in a world of action";⁶ but are those who think necessarily affected with extreme and chronic paralysis of the will? And even if this theme had

⁶ *Hamlet*, ed. Sir E. K. Chambers (New York, 1917), p. xvi.

general validity, would it have stirred the emotions of the Elizabethans to tragic depths? Professor Bradley's *Hamlet*, the unhappy victim of neurasthenic shock, gives the play no more breadth of application than a treatise on abnormal psychology; and, furthermore, the Elizabethan reaction to insanity was usually humorous rather than pathetic. Such conceptions of the hero preclude any theme for the play more tragic or more universal than a Swifitean homily on the weakness of mankind; and, as previous chapters have shown, they are not borne out by the major incidents of the plot.

The first half of *Hamlet* consists of the Prince's efforts to test the truth of the Ghost's message: it culminates in the play-scene, which supplies this proof. The second half of the tragedy comprises Hamlet's efforts, despite his guards and despite his exile to England, to put this message into action: it culminates in the killing of Claudius. From the antecedent action to the catastrophe, regicide is the subject of the play; and it dominates all other elements in the plot: the first act tells the story of the preceding regicide; the second and third acts test the truth of this information; the fourth act consists of Claudius' efforts to kill the Crown Prince, a crime that approaches regicide; and the last act shows Hamlet finally accomplishing the regicide of Claudius. At the beginning of the play, a whole Renaissance society appears before us in fairly efficient working order, the people laboring day and night to support the monarchy, and the diplomatic corps by the mere force of prestige suppressing the revolt in Norway. As the end of the play approaches, partly, one judges, as a consequence of Polonius' death, disorganization has set in: a mob can break into the palace without effective opposition; and at the last, even Claudius' own courtiers make no move to defend his life. The results of regicide are obvious, first in the breakdown of government, finally in the ending of the dynasty. Regicide governs also the changes in the characters: from the benevolent despot, Claudius becomes a tyrant almost as bad as Macbeth, one who by the lowest trickery seeks the life of the very man whom he has made Crown Prince; and even

characters who are ignorant of the murder of the Elder Hamlet suffer moral disintegration from its ultimate effects: Gertrude commits incest; and Laertes stoops to treachery. Regicide dominates both the plot and the characters of the play.

Regicide was indeed a proper theme for Elizabethan tragedy. Mere murder was somewhat commonplace in that boisterous age; and to be deeply significant, a murder must effect the nation as a whole. Renaissance society was highly organized: the lower orders were peasants, yeomanry, or servants; the middle classes were in the guilds, the army, or the Church; and the nobility, courtiers, and high officials impressed upon all classes a hereditary cast. The social system was supposed to be static; and a man was so utterly identified with his place in society that the average Elizabethan seeking information asked, not *who*, but *what* a person was. The great institutions such as the semi-tribal family, the State and the Church dominated the individual; and tragedy, therefore, to be significant, was perforce obliged to deal with dynastic, or national, or at least institutional, issues; and of all institutions, the State was the most powerful and the most significant.⁷ Indeed, under Renaissance absolutism, as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern declare:

Guil. Most holy and religious fear it is
To keep those many many bodies safe
That feed and live upon your majesty.

Ros. The single and peculiar life is bound,
With all the strength and armour of the mind,
To keep itself from noyance; but much more
That spirit upon whose weal depends and rests
The lives of many. The cease of majesty
Dies not alone; but, like a gulf, doth draw
What's near it with it: it is a massy wheel,
Fix'd on the summit of the highest mount,
To whose huge spokes ten thousand lesser things
Are mortis'd and adjoin'd; which, when it falls,
Each small annexment, petty consequence,

⁷ See A. H. Gilbert, "Seneca and the Criticism of Elizabethan Tragedy," *P. Q.*, XIII, 370 ff.; and W. Farnham, *The Mediæval Heritage of Elizabethan Tragedy* (Berkeley, [Calif.] 1936), pp. 340 ff.

Attends the boisterous ruin. Never alone
Did the king sigh, but with a general groan.

The theme of regicide, furthermore, involved matters of political theory that were particularly timely in early seventeenth-century England. The burning question of the succession engaged the minds of all serious Englishmen as the latter days of Queen Elizabeth approached; and it was much debated whether religion, nationality, or sheer right of birth should determine the succession: under the shrewd management of Cecil, Divine Right triumphed; and England accepted as its king a Scotchman, educated by John Knox in the Presbyterian creed, one who was an Englishman neither in birth nor in religion, whose one claim to the throne was his legitimate descent from Henry VII. This solution of the difficulty is not surprising, for the Anglican clergy for two generations had been preaching Divine Right as the justification of Henry VIII's breach with the Papacy. Of course, King James exalted Divine Right as the *conditio sine qua non* of royalty; and, in his many speeches and writings, he never wearied of pointing out to his English subjects the great advantages that they enjoyed from the rule of one whose claim was incontestable, because he had been born God's Anointed ruler over them. Divine Right was the issue that lay behind the Gunpowder Plot; Divine Right was the essence of the special oath of allegiance that James in consequence required of his subjects; and Divine Right was the basic issue of the long pamphlet war between James and his supporters against the Papacy, the Jesuits, and their adherents. One of the *cruces* in this argument, which engaged the attention of the learned all over Western Europe, was the justification of regicide: had a subject the right to kill even the worst of kings? This matter of regicide is the politico-moral question that lies behind Claudius' assassination of the Elder Hamlet; this is the question of "conscience" that gives Hamlet pause, and makes him unwilling to damn his soul by killing God's Anointed, unless he is doubly sure that the Ghost spoke truth; Divine Right wins Laertes to the side of Claudius; and the horror of his treacher-

ous murder of his Prince makes Laertes confess as he dies, and at once brings on the killing of Claudius. A play of regicide was a play on the political theory of the Divine Right of Kings. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is such a play; and its repeated acceptance of the Divine Right theory is quite what one would expect of a tragedy written about the time of the accession of James I. Indeed, a court-dramatist could hardly have written otherwise of government.

Shakespeare developed slowly in his political and social consciousness. The very early plays, such as *Loves Labours* and the *Comedy of Errors*, have little significance of theme, for they do not look deeply into life; but, by degrees, as the dramatist came to realize more and more the differences between Stratford, which still lived in the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance life of London and the court, he increasingly expressed in his plays this vivid contrast between rural and urban society.⁸ In the *Merchant of Venice*, he showed the evolution from medieval to modern economic life;⁹ in *Beatrice* and in *Olivia*,¹⁰ he depicted the new, emancipated woman; in *Gobbo*¹¹ and *Malvolio*,¹² the revolution in the servant-class; in *Falstaff*¹³ and *Orlando*,¹⁴ the problem of the younger son of good family, who could no longer turn knight-errant or enter a monastery for a living—a theme that seems to reappear in the person of *Horatio*. The predominance of political government in the Renaissance, however, perforce drew Shakespeare's consideration to this fountainhead of power and authority. As he rose in the theatrical world, furthermore, he must have come into closer and closer contact with the court; and thus he had increasing opportunity to study at first hand the inner workings of government. The disputed accession of King James I,

⁸ See the present writer, "Court vs. Country in Shakespeare's Plays," *J. E. G. Ph.*, XXXIII, 222.

⁹ See the present writer, "Usury in 'The Merchant of Venice,'" *M. P.*, XXXIII, 37 ff.

¹⁰ See the present writer, "The Wooing of Olivia," *Neophil.*, XXIII, 37 ff.

¹¹ See the present writer, "Shakespeare's Rustic Servants," *Sh. Jhrb.*, LXIX, 87.

¹² See the present writer, "Olivia's Household," *PMLA.*, XLIX, 797.

¹³ See the present writer, "Sir John Falstaff," *R. E. S.*, VIII, 414.

¹⁴ See the present writer, "Orlando, the Younger Brother," *P. Q.*, XIII, 72.

moreover, aroused an intense interest in political theory; and thus both the conditions of Renaissance society and the timely interests of the court must have influenced the chief dramatist of the "King's Men" to emphasize the political values of the Hamlet story.

This conception of the plot as a study in regicide is Shakespeare's own, and seems to have grown on him in successive revisions of the play. The *Bestrafte Brudermord*, as its title implies, is a drama chiefly of fratricide: Hamlet refers to the murder as "this fratricide"; and the Elder Hamlet appears as "father" and as "husband." The first quarto is more national and less personal: the appearance of the Ghost "bodes some strange eruption to our state"; Hamlet cries out that "The time is out of joint"; he first addresses the Ghost as "Hamlet, king, father, royal Dane," a choice and an arrangement of titles that set him forth as a monarch; and, in speaking to Gertrude, he refers to the murder as "kill a king." All of these passages are retained in the standard text and others of the sort are even added—an apparent indication that Shakespeare, in one or more revisions deliberately emphasized the murder in its public aspects: the Prince declares his native land a "prison"; "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark"; and Hamlet describes Claudius as "He that hath killed my king." In place of the reference to "my father murdered by a villaine" in the first quarto, the final text is made to read

. . . a king
Upon whose property and most dear life
A damn'd defeat was made.

Claudius' famous declaration of Divine Right, furthermore, is expanded from two lines in the quarto to its present form. If these changes represent revision by the author, then the national aspects of the play clearly grew on Shakespeare as he reconsidered it.¹⁵ Miss Spurgeon, furthermore, particularly

¹⁵ His elaboration, moreover, of Osric's part about the time of the new King's accession also suggests that he revised the play about 1603 to fit it to the royal taste.

notes the prevalence of images borrowed from sickness and disease, applied to the court and to the whole people.¹⁶

Hamlet, then, as Professor Kittredge would maintain, is "the tragedy not of an individual but of a group";¹⁷ and that group is the royal family, and so the whole nation of Denmark. But the theme of *Hamlet* is more deeply grounded in human nature than the theory of regicide. In illustrating his timely political point, Shakespeare depicts a perennial social struggle, the *one* against the *many*, the individual in revolt against a society that has, unwittingly or not, compromised with evil until it cannot, or should not, stand. This is the theme of Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*; but even Ibsen's brilliant play is naïve and simple in its depiction of the struggle as compared to Shakespeare's; and it is more on the obvious physical plane of mere mob violence. In Shakespeare, the conflict is on the subtler plane of Renaissance court-intrigue, and despite this added difficulty, seems to have finer verisimilitude. As in life, the two main protagonists by degrees come to a realization of the issues; and most of the others, as in life, never know the real significance of what goes on around them. Hamlet is an idealist, but of a sturdy cast, not the poor weakling of the Romantic critics. Like the true hero of a tragedy, he represents thoroughly normal human nature struggling to make life conform to the ethical patterns that he has always believed to be the Right; and, even though our Right in the twentieth century is of a different sort as regards kings and governments, we can in this struggle see a depiction of any struggle to establish an ideal. The comparison with Ibsen is somewhat apropos. Hamlet, like Dr. Stockmann challenges the vested interests on which the entire social order rests: in Ibsen, the tyranny of a stupid and misled democracy; in Shakespeare, a crafty absolutism, which would be benevolent, but cannot escape its evil past. Shakespeare's tragedy carries the conflict to the only possible conclusion, mutual extermination; Ibsen's problem-play sets forth and analyzes the

¹⁶ C. F. E. Spurgeon, *Shakespeare's Imagery* (New York, 1936), pp. 316 ff.

¹⁷ G. L. Kittredge, *Shakespeare* (Cambridge, 1916), p. 40.

forces involved with gusto and finesse, but leaves the spectator in doubt as to the ultimate event. Is Dr. Stockmann at the end really "the strongest man in all the world"? Certainly he would not be so in Renaissance society; and probably not in any human society; for one is not the stronger for lack of co-operation from one's fellows. If Dr. Stockmann finally triumphed, it was not because he stood alone, but because he had truth on his side, just as Hamlet had, according to the social *mores* of his age. But Shakespeare knew that the justice of one's cause, though in the end ruinous to one's adversary, is no sure protection to oneself; and Hamlet perished along with his antagonist.

The Renaissance saw the breakdown of both the great medieval ideals, Christian and chivalric, that had dominated society in former times, and also of the two great corresponding institutions, the Church and feudalism, which had formerly arranged men's lives. It had substituted a nationalistic absolutism for these earlier ideals. At the same time, the Humanist ideal allowed the individual a scope as wide as all paganism. Thus a Renaissance court, at once the center of concentrated absolutism in the person of the king and of a theoretical individualism among the courtiers and scholars that it attracted, presented a complex antinomy of points of view. Surely so complete a contrast might serve as the basis of dramatic conflict: set a single enlightened courtier, a great noble, in opposition to the entrenched power of royalty; make him of royal blood, in fact Crown Prince; make him charming and popular; put right upon his side, a right that he has questioned and tested and found indubitable; let him, in fact, spend half the play in ascertaining the justice of his cause; and, also at the middle of the play, let the king come to realize the danger in which he and the whole social structure that depends upon him, stand from this upright and determined individual. The king at once resorts to exile and assassination, but the Prince escapes; the King is driven to more uncertain means; but, at the last, these means forsake him; his fellow-conspirator discloses the plot; and both regicide and revenger go down to de-

struction. This is the play of *Hamlet*; as Horatio reviews the plot in the final scene, it is just such a tissue of court-intrigue:

Of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forc'd cause,
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fallen on the inventors' head. . . .

It is indeed an intricate design of "plots and errors." This is the play of *Hamlet*, the struggle of a single champion of right and vengeance against a social order founded on the evil of regicide. By degrees, the supporters of this established order are removed or neutralized, Polonius, Gertrude, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern; and finally the two protagonists meet face to face in even conflict. *Hamlet* is more than a play of the dreadful consequences of killing God's Anointed; it is a play of *Athanasius contra mundum*, a play of the vindication of right by the individual against society, expressed, to be sure, in terms of Renaissance life and Renaissance political theory, but still a play on the eternal theme of the *one* against the *many*.

This theme of individualism in a highly organized social structure is inherent, if not consciously expressed, in several of Shakespeare's dramas. It underlies *Richard III*, who gains a crown through craft and crooked courses, and who finally loses it in consequence; it underlies *Richard II*, whom mere folly led to challenge the feudal system of his age and who came thus to an evil end. In *Julius Caesar*, the theme seems to be more consciously expressed: the conspirators cannot endure that Caesar should destroy the old Roman oligarchy and "bear the palm alone"; and so they unite for his destruction only in their turn to be destroyed. *Hamlet*, *Escalus*, *Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Timon*, and *Antony*, the lover of *Cleopatra*, all express the revolt of the individual struggling to dominate a social order, either to reform it or to satisfy their own desires and ambitions; and all come to an untimely end, and drag down with them the established order against which they fought: in the Renaissance, society rested on such insecure foundations that mutual destruction was the logical solution of such a conflict; and in

Hamlet it could hardly be otherwise. Indeed, if one must draw a moral lesson from Shakespeare's tragedies, perhaps one of the most fundamental might well be the need of the individual for society and of society for honest and active individuals. This is a theme as universal as any maxim concerning the relationship of human kind; and, in *The Tempest*, Shakespeare depicts Prospero returning to his people and his throne, forgiving his enemies, marrying his daughter to the son of a former adversary and so bringing about a happy resolution after long years of uncertainty and exile. The individualist, it seems, must learn to use, rather than merely to combat, the social organization of the age.

This Hamlet, the knight-errant, the champion of right in a corrupt society, is surely a more significant and universal figure than the faltering and neurasthenic Prince who struggles, not against the regicide King, but merely to screw his courage to the sticking place, only without a Lady Macbeth to drive him on. Rather few of us, fortunately are so subject to mental weakness as to suffer from paralysis of will; but all of us who compose human society have the endless problem of adjustment to the aims and organization of our fellows; and, like Dr. Stockmann, we must choose between passive co-operation, evolution or revolution, depending on the situation and on our temperament; and, if we choose revolution, it will probably engulf the reformer along with his antagonist. While men live among men, this problem of adjustment is inescapable and omnipresent in every act of life. This surely is the philosophy and fundamental theme that caused the tragedy, when first performed, to "please the wiser sort."¹⁸ In the play-scene, Hamlet scrupulously tests the situation; in the soliloquies, he tests his own ideals. He can see but one righteous course; and he struggles single-mindedly against all odds, and at the very moment of victory is a martyr to his cause. The spectators at the Blackfriars or at the Globe, courtier, merchant, prentice and country clown, even such as could hardly comprehend Divine Right and the theory of government, could understand

¹⁸ See Gabriel Harvey's marginalia to Speght's *Chaucer*.

and honor such a struggle, and follow step by step the efforts of such a hero, and see in him themselves; and so, in his fall, they could experience the universal significance and deep poignancy of highest tragedy. Shakespeare's audience was an audience of men; and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was a man's *Hamlet*.

INDEX BY ACTS AND SCENES

The topical arrangement of the present study necessarily results in scattering throughout the volume the interpretation of passages contiguous in the play. The purpose of this index by acts and scenes is to make it possible for a reader of the drama to turn readily to the major commentary on each crucial passage as he goes through the text. The line-references are to the Aldis Wright Edition.

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